

Issue 4 (2015) – Performance: Circulations and Relations

Editors' Introduction – Stefanie A Jones and Eero Laine

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Editors' Introduction

Stefanie A Jones and Eero Laine

ABSTRACT This issue of *Lateral* examines the means by which performances happen at a variety of scales of cultural production and circulation, from the street to the living room to the border; from a cellphone to the theatrical stage to the art gallery; from public discourse in policy debates to the global circulation of performances of blackness, alterity, and power. Trends across these various means are thus particularly illuminating for the study of culture; performance can give us insight into aspects of culture more broadly and with great ability to account for differences and dynamics of power.

In cultural production (and all consciousness is in this sense produced) the true range is from information and description, or naming and indication, to embodiment and *performance*...Thus a sociology of drama, already concerned with institutions (theatre and their predecessors and successors), with formations (groups of dramatists, dramatic and theatrical movements), with formed relationships (audiences, including the formation of audiences within theatres and their wider social formation), would go on to include forms, not only in the sense of their relations to world-views or structures of feeling but also in the more active sense of their whole performance (social methods of speaking, moving, representing, and so on).

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139.

This issue began with the relatively simple idea that performance is integral to cultural studies. We asked for papers that explored the actions, processes, systems, limitations, and interventions of performance in and through specific cultural practices and ideas. Deemphasizing the product or the ends of performance we invited contributors to closely consider performance relationally and in circulation. The papers we received in response to our call surpassed our expectations not only for the ways that the authors embrace the idea of performance as process, but especially for the ways in which the authors intervene in cultural activities through performance and, in doing so, cut to the political quick of cultural studies.

This issue of *Lateral* examines the means by which performances happen at a variety of scales of cultural production and circulation, from the street to the living room to the border; from a cellphone to the theatrical stage to the art gallery; from public discourse in policy debates to the global circulation of performances of blackness, alterity, and power. Trends across these various means are thus particularly illuminating for the study of culture; performance can give us insight into aspects of culture more broadly and with great ability to account for differences and dynamics of power.

Taken collectively, these essays initially reveal performance at and as the frontier. Performance not only operates at, but defines the border: the US/México border, the border between blackness and white nationalism, between justice for and exploitation of

the body, between homefullness and eviction, the border between flesh and world. Performance both constitutes these borders and reveals them as permeable in their act of constitution. Relatedly, these papers are threaded through with considerations of the body—its limits, transgressions, histories, economies, affects, and technologies. On the cusp of the politics of culture, with the body acting as the hinge between habitus and field, performance uniquely precipitates these structures in the realm of cultural studies.

By contextualizing these various means of performance, these essays reveal their objects of study within their historical conditions. Thus we are very interested in the ways that this collection of essays engages performance's complicity in material power relations albeit in various times, locations, and politico-economic orders. Nonetheless, at the margins we find that, again and again, performance functions as the locus of exchange of capitals, and thus of negotiations over power. While some authors in this issue condemn certain performance-based means for preserving or advancing existing hegemonic relations such as capitalism and white supremacy, others seek the spaces that performance opens for certain subjects, even if they are often but not always openings for white, bourgeois US artists.

Our first article, from [Hillary Miller](#), takes up theories of the city, illness, and precarity via a variety of performances by New Yorker Annie Lanzillotto. Miller argues that as she struggles with survival and eviction in the city, Lanzillotto reveals the bodily and economic limits of the precarious artist while protesting the inequities of the neoliberal city. Through this unique and eloquent study, Miller exposes how neoliberalism acutely and chronically structures the contemporary city's spaces, socialities, and bodies, and explores performance's potential and complicity in the face of those structures.

[Leah Perry](#) presents a feminist history of Riot Grrrl and Kathleen Hanna in order to explore the hope and the limits of an individualist revolution in the 1990s. Perry takes on the performance of shamelessness embodied in Hanna's songs as well as through bodywriting, sex work, zine production, and other aspects of the riot grrrl movement. Ultimately Perry exposes the position of these performances: they are alternative youth culture for certain subjects which both work against and from within the structures of neoliberalism. Perry concludes that shamelessness might remain a promising space for an urgent anti-racist, feminist politics, if it can work to destabilize power and center women from oppressed groups.

[Alison Reed](#) investigates the border- and boundary-crossing performance of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *TransBorder Immigrant Tool* (TBT), an incomplete cell phone program that offers GPS, guidance, and poetry to those attempting to cross into the United States across the Mexico/US border. Reed suggests a provocation-based performance of "queer provisionality," revealing the aesthetics of oppressive power structures by juxtaposing them to social utopias. Interrogating the national neoliberal project of both US liberalism and US conservatism, Reed's essay is also a transcription of the performances launched around TBT, the social and political machinery set into motion by Electronic Disturbance Theater's failed utopian project.

[Eunsong Kim](#) challenges existing literature on Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, articulating Sierra's neoliberal aesthetics as part of a process of managing the imagination of finance capitalism. By situating Sierra's performance art as a performance of terror, Kim argues that Sierra does not just collaterally reproduce capitalist power relations, but coldly and calculatedly exploits and violates the bodies of the working poor, particularly people of color, for his own profit and for the viewing pleasure of his wealthy audiences. Kim fiercely critiques the ways Sierra profits from his use of Marxist discourse and appeals to political

action. In doing so, Kim challenges scholars and artists to embrace the position of laborers and take up Black Radicalism against artistic instantiations of capitalism.

[Kristin Moriah](#)'s essay is rooted in extensive archival work in the US and Germany, examining the transatlantic circulation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through markets of performance and literature in and between Germany and the United States. The essay follows the performative tropes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from its originary political resonances to the present-day restaurants, train-stops, and housing projects named for the novel. Moriah reveals how the figurations of blackness arising from these texts are foundational to the construction of Germanness and American-German relations in the early 20th century and beyond.

Finally, the digital format of *Lateral* offers an enormous range of possibilities for working through Cultural Studies' approaches to the politics and performances of race, gender, class, and ability. Both Sheila Malone and Jade E. Davis take up those challenges and possibilities with digital installations on power and practice.

Malone's work is both [digital art piece](#) and [critical essay](#), which explores the queerness and the vibrating machine in light of both recent scholarship on objects and materiality and the author's own work as a performance artist. Malone's art cuts across and questions the divides between highbrow and lowbrow, permanence and ephemerality, the G-rated and the X-rated. The digital installation and accompanying essay understand the space of inbetweenness as a potential site for queer interventions into existing material orders.

[Jade E. Davis](#) embraces *Lateral's* digital publishing platform in what is described as a "found media journey" informed by the theoretical works of Zora Neale Hurston's "How I Became Colored Me" and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Davis intertwines these pieces, integrating and overlaying them with sound, static pictures, and live imagery to disrupt the act of reading and to raise questions related to "the performative role of translation" in light of the often difficult relations and circulations of blackness, gender, and language.

Our many thanks to our contributors for their fantastic work. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to Jamie Skye Bianco for a history of labor developing and sustaining the journal and for first inviting us to edit a guest issue. Thanks to Victor Peterson for programming an initial version of this issue. Our deep gratitude to Chris Alen Sula for the labor and patience to make the issue come alive, and masterfully and rapidly working through our many detailed requests and ideas. Finally, we are profoundly indebted to our many anonymous readers whose otherwise invisible labor made this issue possible.

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SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

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[!\[\]\(0b26ca95b2506f3d48aafc7555f0ad20_img.jpg\) Twitter](#)



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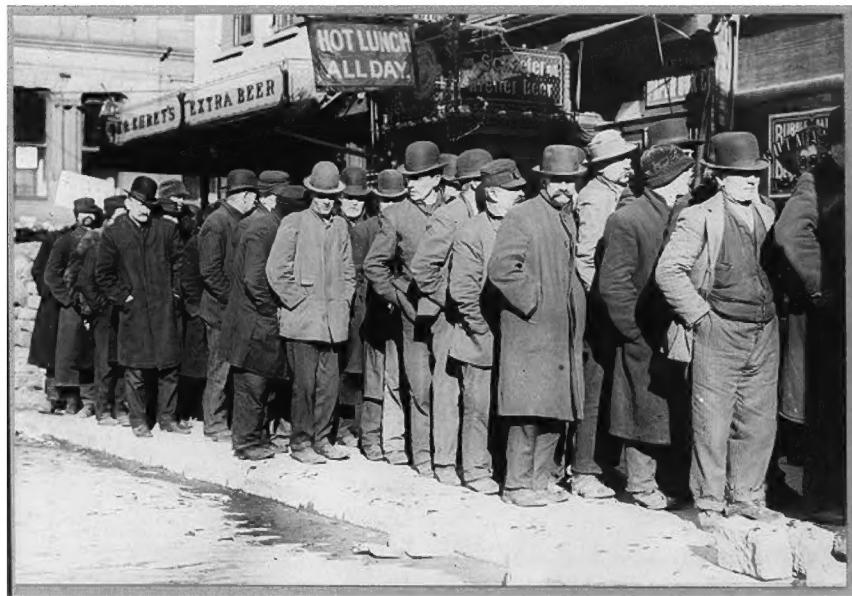
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Live from the Nebulizer: Annie Lanzillotto and Eviction Survival

Hillary Miller

ABSTRACT Hillary Miller takes up theories of the city, illness, and precarity via a variety of performances by New Yorker Annie Lanzillotto. Miller argues that as she struggles with survival and eviction in the city, Lanzillotto reveals the bodily and economic limits of the precarious artist while protesting the inequities of the neoliberal city. Through this unique and eloquent study, Miller exposes how neoliberalism acutely and chronically structures the contemporary city's spaces, socialities, and bodies, and explores performance's potential and complicity in the face of those structures.



"You have to understand the basics to survive a whole life."

—Annie Lanzillotto¹

"No it is not simple, this business of poverty."

—Dorothy Day²

On April 13, 2012, Annie Lanzillotto uploaded a video of herself to YouTube, entitled "[Live from the Nebulizer](#)." She filmed the five-minute direct address rant while suffering from an acute bout of contagious double pneumonia. In the video, she waits for a visiting nurse in her mother's apartment in Yonkers. The rhythmic, wheezing nebulizer creates an eerie score. The image is framed within a tight circle, as if filmed through the apartment's peephole. A surgical mask obscures her face, and a newsboy cap is pulled low over her eyes. Her fifty year-old lungs have "absorbed all the abuse of generations."³ She delivers a story of fresh abuse, from earlier that day, when her former Marine brother lost his temper and threw a tray of meatballs at the door. As the tale of family violence arcs

towards a finish, Lanzillotto does not hide her despondency. She details the logistics of her expensive treatments: the life-giving puffs of the nebulizer cost two thousand dollars each month, money that she does not have.

Annie Rachele Lanzillotto, the artist behind a series of discomfiting videos that blend solo performance with patient update, thus demonstrates the techniques and the spectacle of eviction survival. She is a Bronx-born poet who grew up popping wheelies on Saint Raymonds Avenue in the late Sixties. After her mother handed her father an order of protection, Lanzillotto unhappily relocated with her mother's family to a temporary apartment complex in Yonkers. There she studied and read for hours every night, an "education girl" in spite of the taunts of her relatives. At eighteen, Lanzillotto headed to Brown University as a softball recruit with a financial aid package, but a diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma halted her college career. In 1993, at thirty-one years old, Lanzillotto performed her first autobiographical solo show at Manhattan Class Company, *Confessions of a Bronx Tomboy: My Throwing Arm, This Useless Expertise*. After that first foray onto the stage, Lanzillotto crafted a series of solo shows and performance art pieces that explored the personal ethnographies of war (*How to Wake up a Marine in a Foxhole*), food and cultural heritage (*a'Schapett*, a site-specific work at the Arthur Avenue Retail Market in the Bronx), intercultural performance and gender identity (*Sext Saudade*), and religious histories (*Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer*). After years of small-scale productions buoyed by teaching gigs and commissions—with health crises frequently interrupting her creative output—2013 marked Lanzillotto's most prolific year, with the publication of her poetry collection, *Schistsong* (Bordighera Press) and a memoir, *L is For Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir* (SUNY Press, Lambda Literary Award finalist).

In anthropologist S. Lochlann Jain's recent book, *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us*, Jain, a cancer survivor, rails against the "survivor" rhetoric and the deployment of a term that can mean either the survival of a dehumanizing experience of terror or someone who outlives others.⁴ It is this second, overlapping definition that resonates so powerfully with Lanzillotto's twist on the archetypal working resident forced out of the city due to shrinking affordances. Lanzillotto named her poetry collection *Schistsong*, after the metamorphic rock upon which Manhattan island is built. In its poems, she seeks new metonymy for life as a New Yorker: beset by anxiety at sunset, she breathes best in exhaust, downs vino in Tribeca on a candlelit loading dock, and takes her chemo to go.⁵ An inescapable fact of her biography, illness becomes the relevant synecdoche for the city itself. Lanzillotto not only performs as someone who has undergone treatment, but also animates the calculus of the neoliberal city. Who can afford to stay, and who can afford to leave? That Lanzillotto remains is both remarkable and unremarkable and—like her status as a survivor—signifies something potentially arbitrary or disturbingly fated. More potently, Lanzillotto's work incorporates illness not as metaphor but as a transhistorical performative: an integral element of her experience and a connector to decades of precariously positioned working (and workless), waged (and unwaged) men and women. Lanzillotto's poetry and performances inject the unwaged labors of the artist into narratives defined by eviction and survival.



Lanzillotto (as the pushcart peddler "Chimaroot") and her grandmother Rosa Marsico Petruzzelli performing together in *a'Schapett!* (1996) at the Arthur Avenue Retail Market in the Bronx. Photo: Andrew Perret

How to define *precarity* in the context of one artist's work? The contested term refers most broadly to an economic condition particular to those without infrastructural support. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider writes, "The category appears as flexible and dislocatable as its members, variously containing refugees, asylum seekers, homeless persons, women, migrant workers, the underemployed, the long-term unemployed—and even, in general, youth."⁶ Lanzillotto's work communicates "eviction" as a kind of condition of the precariat, threading all of the above together, in threat or in everyday reality. To employ "eviction" in this sense is to see its multiplicity in the global city: the eviction of people from their home and the city, an eviction from the "innovation economy"—producing a labor that has value—and an eviction from the quotidian rhythms that establish the world of the living.

Many discussions of the "the neoliberal city" contend that workers in industries understood as "creative" increasingly experience precarity associated with post-Fordist employment and neoliberal governance.⁷ But, as Robert K. Schaeffer argues in a response to theorists of the pop sociology undergirding many formulations of precarity, "work has always been precarious for most of the working women, men, children, and elders around the world since the sixteenth century," with precarity "not a novel condition but a familiar one, particularly for women."⁸ Or, as Isabell Lorey explains, "precarity in capitalism is nothing new."⁹ Lanzillotto's work echoes a reality already established in these writings on the precarious condition and urban neoliberalism: it can describe innumerable ontological categories. For Lauren Berlant, precarity is a "perfect storm of old stories and new orientations," its reach extending to dimensions emotional, political, material, and spiritual. "[P]recariousness is] a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that's not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed."¹⁰ This loss of faith, often underemphasized in scholarship on precarity, finds its expression in Lanzillotto's writing about past and present New York City. The city and its attendant nostalgia, its pop culture visions of generations of immigrants inhabiting, reproducing, and dying, are parodied in her confrontation with the hollow reality of once-middle-class neighborhoods. I analyze Lanzillotto's work within this framework of artist precarity and the performance of illness in neoliberal New York City and trace Lanzillotto's narratives of survival and

eviction that simultaneously confront Berlant's rallying cry for a new world and loss of faith in a fantasy of the old.

Performing Eviction: Precarity and New York City

Annie Lanzillotto's performances construct a cityscape historically shaped and specifically located. In his writing on "austerity ideology" across three mayoralties in New York City, historian Julian Brash charts the economic transitions from a post-World War II metropolis governed by a coalition of finance, real estate interests, industry, and labor, through the budget crisis of 1975 that pushed labor and representatives of the poor from a position of power.¹¹ The 1980s "saw huge jumps in income inequality and poverty among the city's residents," and gains distributed in a highly unequal fashion.¹² The 1990s delivered the "revanchist" city of disintegrating liberal policy. While some critics branded Michael Bloomberg's three mayoral terms (2002-2013) as unequivocally plutocratic, the disproportionate influence of the financial sector was well established in New York by 1999, years before Bloomberg won office.¹³ Still, he has been both celebrated and reviled as an apotheosis of neoliberal governance. To the latter camp, his technocratic approach only further normalized the reign of austerity and class politics: if his twelve-year reign constituted the final "act" of post-World War II economic restructuring, the 2000s was the decade which exhumed the waste. In November 2013, Bill DeBlasio, a progressive candidate for Mayor, won a surprising landslide victory that was quickly interpreted as a repudiation of former Mayor Bloomberg's policies: the business-as-usual approach to income inequality, unaffordable housing, and the feared transformation of New York into exclusively "a rich person's city."¹⁴

For those of Lanzillotto's generation (b. 1963), the mid-1990s and its accompanying boom and bust were the exacerbation of larger trends rooted in post-World War II dynamics of personal and national histories. In Neil Smith and Jason Hackworth's periodization of gentrification, its "third-wave" began circa 1993,¹⁵ right around the opening salvos of Lanzillotto's creative career. This post-recession gentrification differed in four prominent ways from previous formations: gentrification expanded beyond the inner core, large developers were increasingly the first to orchestrate reinvestment, effective resistance declined as the working class was displaced, and, most crucially for Smith and Hackworth, the state was now more involved in the process.¹⁶ While some scholars emphasize the role of the downtown arts scene in second-wave gentrification of the Lower East Side, Lanzillotto falls outside many of the waves that installed artists in so-called blighted neighborhoods. Born at the wrong time to either capitalize on or benefit from artist migrations, she eventually falls victim to these shifts, and presents the ghostly after-affects of New York City's economic restructuring in the 1990s and 2000s through the visage of a queer "i Bamboccioni"—the Italian word for "if you're in you're [sic] forties and you go back to living with ya mother."¹⁷ Lanzillotto did, in fact, go back to living with her mother in her forties, when she was still writing and performing but could not find affordable, stable housing.

Scholars such as Ann Markusen have exposed gaps in the fabric of "creative economy" evangelism and the problematic realities behind the tech-centric "creative class."¹⁸ The work of performance theorists Schneider, Shannon Jackson, and Nicholas Ridout articulate the fictions of a neoliberal rhetoric that promotes "creativity" as the font of economic promise.¹⁹ Lanzillotto's work, then, should be situated alongside mounting critiques of the fashionable policies (and attendant jargon) that reflect the contradictions of the contemporary city: worshiping renewal through certain industries, neighborhoods plumped up with incentives for the real estate sector and specialized categories of "cultural producers," while long-time culture-makers protest their own evictions. City boosters design advertising campaigns to generate creative capital, but the

larger *polis* discerns an uneven urban recovery that neglects older professionals, those outside of the tech or finance sectors, and those in need of safety nets (veterans, the ill, homeless children).

Lanzillotto stands among an ever-widening cohort of artists who enact resistance to these dominant city trends, through coalitions, new work, and the promotion of their experiences within these developments. Musician David Byrne's 2013 article in the *Guardian* threatened self-deportation from New York City due to the characteristics of its new Gilded Age, in which the middle-class are excluded along with "emerging artists, musicians, actors, dancers, writers, journalists and small business people."²⁰ Queer performers from Taylor Mac to Penny Arcade to Split Britches have all devised works that mourn a livable New York and protest a fortress culture that functions more expertly as a global business hub than it does as a space of potential for creative interaction and collaboration, for artistic survival and sustainability.

Loss of Faith in the Fantasy: *WheredaFFFhuck Did New York Go?*

These expressions of dissatisfaction from notable artists create a particular anxiety, and lead also to fevered competitions for the most "livable" geographies—Berlin or L.A.? Detroit or Dubuque?²¹ And what of the artists who stay? One answer comes in the form of Lanzillotto's 2008 stage play, *The Flat Earth: WheredaFFFhuck Did New York Go?*, performed at Dixon Place, a small performance space then located on the Bowery.²² As the title suggests, Lanzillotto maps her search for New York and uses improvisatory techniques to gesture towards a drama not of the city, but with the city.

That Dixon Place itself was still fashioned as a living room—before its capital campaign and move into a new home on nearby Chrystie Street—made it an ideal location to play with the powerful confessional imperatives extant in any dialogue about gentrification. The encounters between artist-as-interloper and artist-as-resident, between artist-as-developer and artist-against-developer, touch the intimate domestic sphere. And so Lanzillotto's evening of confessional performance work was presented in the space that had been artistic director Ellie Covan's actual home, with the audience seated on couches ringing the ramshackle stage. (Dixon Place's graphic icon is still living room furniture, even if it now boasts regulation theatre seats.) *The Flat Earth*'s monologues describe a series of exclusions: pushed from the piers by police officers, shoved from her home by landlords, from her healthy body by cancer, and from youth by menopause. The performance encompasses the parallel stories of displacement from her domestic and social homes, from her safe queer spaces in the city, from the performance spaces of her early performing community. This triumvirate of survival needs and demands—housing, health, and intimacy—comprise the triple threats that contradict the performance's romance with community and the role of the artist within it. Her despair leads to a desire to see the wider landscape of the city's changes, a stubborn poet in a precarious home.

The second half of *The Flat Earth* abandons Dixon Place—evicting itself—for the street corner on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood rife with buildings destroyed, histories lost, and uses new. In a gestus of *we're all in this together, baby*, Lanzillotto well knows that audiences do not, as Baz Kershaw notes, come "ready-made" for alternative performance.²³ What she produces is a spontaneous un-community theatre that spotlights the raw testimony and intuitive storytelling of audience members and passers-by.

In the first section of *The Flat Earth*, "The Blessing of the Rocks," Lanzillotto engages in a ritual pouring of water over Manhattan schist. She swings a stickball bat to ignite memories of childhood, infused with urban lore spanning the 1600s, 1800s, and 1900s. Lanzillotto bench-presses two traffic lights on a barbell until she reaches

exhaustion, and intones the “ghosts” of the notorious nineteenth century Bowery dive, Suicide McGurk’s. “The Bowery’s got the greatest ghosts in the world!” and Lanzillotto calls on them when she needs courage. In the face of a new Bowery that “looks like Minneapolis,” Lanzillotto needs courage constantly, and the ghosts implore her to “Do something!” with the body she’s got.²⁴ This activist imperative posed like a dare from the ghostly saloon owner McGurk and a related cast of Five Points waiters, gangsters, and bouncers transitions the *The Flat Earth* from the past to the present: her aging, female, queer body, decrying “New York City menopause,” the end of her cycle, and the loss of five neighborhoods.

In the second Act, Lanzillotto directs the audience to follow her as she abandons the living room of Dixon Place, exits onto the Bowery, and migrates around the corner to a mailbox at the intersection of Prince and Elizabeth Streets. Sparklers in hand, she transforms into a rogue Lower East Side tour guide, pointing out the new condos she will never visit and the vestiges of old signs fading on the bricks of buildings.²⁵ Soon surrounded by \$250 boutique T-shirts for sale and walled in by high-rises, Lanzillotto’s celebration is spiked with bitterness. There are no enemies, but the historical characters shaped in act one remain—the bar owners and ice men and stoop sitters and stickball heroes. Her sidewalk march to the mailbox tempers her nostalgia and sharpens her sense of mournful injustice. Lanzillotto’s environmental theatre takes the landscape of the city as its scenery; the mailbox sessions are framed against the backdrop of twenty-story luxury towers.²⁶ The stage is to be the mailbox, that holy blue artifact from her childhood, both a relic and a platform for urban storytelling. The model here is not one of the tour guide—for a tour guide codifies city lines and neighborhood boundaries—but a kind of temporal carnival, in which the sins of the past do penance with the sins of the present. This march begins to feel like a protest: a performance calling attention to a series of exclusions and the matrices of a particularly urban loss.

Lanzillotto submits the performance to the street, to the passers-by, the interlocutors. The stickball bat prop becomes a talking stick passed between audience members and city walkers who climb atop the mailbox to share reflections about the Bowery under the streetlights. Lanzillotto describes one mailbox sharing session this way:

I improvised a lot, and I talked, maybe up to 60 minutes on different nights. And I talked about the history of the flophouses and vaudeville on the Bowery. And this clip is a guy who still lives on the Bowery. He’s homeless, he’s a veteran, ill, and he started out belligerent, because we had a lot of belligerent passers-bys, or drunks, or whatever. This guy took a whole 360—from starting out belligerent, he ended up saying, ‘Ma’am, can I have the stick?’²⁷

First silent, disgruntled, then emboldened, belligerent, and quickly defensive, the man gives in to the lure of personal confession, and, perhaps, an audience. He immediately self-identifies as a homeless veteran. Onlookers can see the storytellers receive a tactile thrill from sitting on the mailbox, sharing in the immediacy of the street. The quality of the performance fulfills a disjointed model of community theatre, one that meets oral histories in their environment of imagining and creates spontaneous street performance. Their arrivals are not disruptions, but rehearsals of outrage.

The movement from Dixon Place onto the Bowery highlights the stark contrast between the performance space and the street; while one might not readily assume the intersection at Prince and Elizabeth to be a relatively “conservative context,”²⁸ the performance reveals it to be just that. The performance rubs bare the political and economic processes that have normalized the space and produced its current attributes. Now on the street, the politics of spatial exclusion foreclose the rich and utopic imagining

of Act I. In Act II, Lanzillotto enacts rituals that cast gentrification as a kind of death—literally the disappearance of bodies. Maybe it is her accent, her constant intoning of buried relations, or maybe it is the serious and not so serious reminder that something—a tribe—is dying out. Which tribe is it? Her memoir includes an extensive glossary of terms for an unnamed language:

fungo: to pitch the ball to yourself

hoodycallit: someone whose name you forgot or don't want to mention or don't want to put in the effort to remember

hoodycall: *hoodycallit*²⁹

Like this reminder of the tenuousness of lingo and language, her figure on the pavement reminds us of a similar loss. On the mailbox we visit North American cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco, where Italian-Americans are among the groups that become another shortcut stand-in for the coming of new and the loss of the urban old—literally, the loss of the old and dying, and the loss of bodies in space. New bars in heavily Italian-American neighborhoods play on the notion of “social clubs” once popular in areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx; bodies swapped for others. While Lanzillotto is an optimistic narrator, lurking behind her nostalgic register is the insistent reminder that for her, art and survival both wage battles against disappearance.

Catastrophic Illness and the Artist Ideal

Lanzillotto’s sensitivity to disappearances is necessarily bound up with her status as a cancer “survivor.” She reminds us that vulnerabilities are often felt and expressed in the aggregate; aches pool in the places where identities meet. As S. Lochlann Jain notes, the “nearly complete lack of socioeconomic support that presses those with catastrophic illness entirely out of the system” provides insights into other justifying logics of capitalism; “cancer itself parodies the capitalist ideal of accrual through time, and people with cancer inhabit its double consciousness.”³⁰ In Lanzillotto’s case, the parody is also of the independent artist ideal, and of the streetwise, rough-hewn New Yorker capable of withstanding the shocks of the city.

The role for which Lanzillotto has received the most attention of late is that of “Grandma Angelina Nunzio” in *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding*, an interactive theatre romp set at the wedding reception of an Italian-American couple from Queens. The play has been running Off-Broadway for over two decades and advertises itself as “the best party in New York,” now with an outpost at Bally’s casino in Las Vegas.³¹ On May 25, 2014, the *New York Times* ran a story about Lanzillotto, which underscored her thirty-three years of dealing with cancer as informing her depiction of Grandma Nunzio. The journalist mentions Lanzillotto’s acquaintance with suffering and scars, but the ebullience of the music, the play, and the dancing, win out: “She’s not acting. She’s living.”³² Separated from the autobiographic frame Lanzillotto so frequently employs in her own work, the *Tony n’ Tina* version of family—and New York—remains disconcertingly far from her usual balancing act of precarity and intimacy. The image accompanying the article encapsulates this disconnect: it could be from our own family album, and while we know this is a performance of family—the sentimental hue of the banquet hall—the fissures are easily forgotten. In the photograph, a cast member pushes Lanzillotto-as-Grandma in a wheelchair through a crowded block of 42nd Street. She holds a cane aloft triumphantly, as if to dismiss any sense of fragility, yet the bustle of the city—the glare of the billboard across the street commanding, “LIVE AUTHENTICALLY”—confirms the urgency underneath a performance that is more about the trappings of identity and family than its viscera. That the context is a moment of mayhem in *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding* suggests the

kind of unchanging New York demanded by such tourist attractions, and one that has moved from the theater to the street.



Annie Lanzillotto makes her way through Times Square as Grandma Angelina Nunzio, in *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*. Published May 25th, 2014 nytimes.com. Photo by David Gonzalez/The New York Times nytimes.com.

Lanzillotto's self-made YouTube video, "Live from the Nebulizer," provides a contrast, and an essential coda to the boisterous cane-shaking Grandma:

My lungs have absorbed all the abuse of generations.... As a little kid, they all smoked, which was just the beginning....my lungs took it all in...all the smoke, all the fighting, all my father's stories about Okinawa.... All the battles when he beat up my mother, I took it all into my lungs...they say 'childhood asthma'... *this is childhood asthma, I'm 50 years old, and now I'm on a Nebulizer....* But these lungs have absorbed all the shit of all the generations of all the Italians and all the psychos, all the paranoid schizophrenia, and here I sit on a Nebulizer, drinkin' in the sweet air every four hours, the medicated, Nebulized air that costs \$2,000 dollars a month. And I don't have a way to pay for this air, either. Medicare said, this is a life-sustaining medicine so we're not paying for it unless you're in a nursing home. Well, I'm not in a nursing home. I told the hospital, you want me to leave here? Three conditions: you gimmie the medicine, you send me a bill, you understand I'm not paying that bill.

Okay, this is Survivor #00795424. Signing out for this morning, Friday the 13th of April, 2012, Yonkers, New York, waiting for the Home Visiting Nurse to come.³³

Tony n' Tina's Wedding offers the family-friendly version of Italian-American *bonhomie* and gentle dysfunction, but on YouTube, Lanzillotto reports from a location most disturbing. In these before (Grandma) and after (Nebulizer) visions of New York City, we are greeted with a surprise: the devastating edge of Lanzillotto's work traces the gaps in available representations. The nebulizer-as-prop emphasizes the material realities of performance just as poignantly as it does the obstacles to the everyday. The viewer of the YouTube video must struggle to see through the claustrophobic framing, to look empathetically, to hear amid the noise of the unaffordable nebulizer, to evade the menacing brother who might return any moment. "Live from the Nebulizer" presents an argument for the reminders of precarity: the bureaucracies and boredoms, the injustices from without and from within.

Within her own body, her own family, her own home, her own community of survivors, alive and dead, Lanzillotto is not a flâneur, nor is she a helicopter news team hovering above. Perhaps the best metaphor for these performances—both Grandma and *The Flat Earth*—is found in the glossary she provides with her memoirs. There is hopefulness in the act of creating a glossary, and it speaks to her commitment to New York and her belief in the discursive act of writing. Theorist José Esteban Muñoz described the negative sentiments that supposedly characterize the post-Fordist moment, noting, “these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness,” and produce an educated hope, “a certain practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced.”³⁴ Lanzillotto follows a similar practice, with aspirations of health, desire, creativity, rest, and habitation.

Lanzillotto’s memoir, *L is for Lion*, documents the upheavals endemic to an adulthood shaped by illness. Her exposure to life-threatening illness came early in her life, when, in 1981 as a freshman at Brown University, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. (Her second bout with cancer came in 1997.) As a consequence, her work frequently makes plain the linkages between urban space, health, and economics. Sociologist Rose Galvin has demonstrated the trend in many western nations to deploy health as virtue, and chronic illness is understood in the terms of a moral failure that signifies a lack of self-reliance and responsibility.³⁵ Galvin bridges the conceptual linkage between the particular stigma of the chronically ill and the neoliberal frame of self-sufficiency as an exalted (healthy) condition: “The healthy person is, in effect, symbolic of the ideal neoliberal citizen, autonomous, active and responsible and the person who deviates from this ideal state is, at best, lacking in value and, at worst, morally culpable.”³⁶ As a queer artist, Lanzillotto is multiply culpable; not only is she bruised by the stigmas attached to lower-income queers,³⁷ but she is also well aware that certain cosmopolitan visions of New York and its art scenes leave little room for a deviation of this “ideal state.”

Lanzillotto’s work also squarely refutes the language of increased burden, a hallmark of the monetization of the value of care and the imperatives of austerity. Jill H. Casid has called for a reconsideration of “care in terms of the demanding exercise of public feelings,” which begins with the many problems of care under conditions of economic precarity: the outsourcing of care and whether care is supported, how it is enacted and on whose terms.³⁸ Lanzillotto’s Grandma/Nebulizer split creates a platform for such questions: she honors the role of care-taking and care-giving, and yet reveals the inviolate state of care-need. This includes her unavoidable reliance on the limited structures of the city, as individual responsibility confronts social responsibility. When the needs of the artist transcend the material realities of her art, Lanzillotto demands a reckoning with matters of interdependence.

Through her blogs (Lanzillotto’s *Cancer Decameron* and i-Italy) and self-produced videos, she reconceives the spaces of her activism and art *in media res*, and gestures most conspicuously to the nagging question of shared responsibility. Lanzillotto’s narrative of illness is shaped by her ability to stubbornly confront these themes of eviction with her hope in interdependence—care for her city enough to stay, care from the city that has kept her alive thus far. The hospitals of the city have what she needs—literally, oxygen and blood—but that the price is steep: the metered time of 25 cents for ten minutes, the demand that every soul discover its ruthless and relentless “inner Trump.”³⁹ The city does not intend to embrace everyone, and the message on the Statue of Liberty is copiously footnoted and harshly edited. There is not room for *all* the “degenerate artists homosexuals crooked teeth painters gifted fags and all their ancestors,” and so what of those with serious illness?⁴⁰ Lanzillotto’s outer-borough artistry protests the ramifications of this ethos through the *vida quotidiana* of a two-time cancer survivor. In all

of Lanzillotto's work, she maintains her defensive posture towards the despair brought about by too many hours spent in hospital rooms ("Over the past twenty-nine years, I average sixty visits a year./ The great thing is they turn me inside out"⁴¹), and her hastily made, improvisatory video rants jab the viewer with the reality that Lanzillotto is living a life of particular discomforts. The poetry she writes proclaims miracles, and the archives of her illness are collected under both duress and divine inspiration.

Schistsong: Eviction Poems

Word by word and line by line, Lanzillotto's book of collected poems, *Schistsong*, can be read as a poetic counter to a downtown arts culture complicit with these erasures. (During her installation works in the late 1990s, Lanzillotto argued for rebellion against "the value system of the downtown artist communities."⁴²) Lanzillotto's relationship with New York sits at the fulcrum of her own negotiations with the manicured mainstream. This is most deeply felt when she travels to the urban spaces that once protected her: from independent performance spaces to dance clubs to the lost piers of Christopher Street to the simplicity of the sunsets on a newly gentrified street. In the poem "Spirit Track," a melancholy sea shanty to be intoned on the West Side Highway, Lanzillotto returns again and again to mourn the loss of the piers and a time "when the edges of the city marked the start of our journeys."⁴³ Yet Lanzillotto punctuates her nostalgia with the violence and brutality she experienced: "Spirit Track" is shadowed by bigoted police and troubled by surveillance and harassment. In his anthropological work on the Christopher Street piers, Martin Manalansan explains, "Far from being a utopic space, the piers nevertheless signify the days when queers felt they owned the sites."⁴⁴ Today, where there were once warehouses, there are now condominium developments, and a new kind of hostility grows among the greenery: the city has become too expensive for those who once sought refuge there, even if real estate companies advertise their Hudson Pier luxury condos in *Gay City*.⁴⁵

In writing of this metamorphosis of the cityscape between hospital stays, Lanzillotto calls out the shell game performed in front of her: the superficial acceptance of this Bronx butch, the price tag hidden behind cultural freedom and annual parades. Lanzillotto stands alongside the many scholars, activists, and artists alike who have critiqued the agenda of mainstream queer politics in the United States, which, they argue, seeks "to join rather than critique and contest" inequalities and injustices.⁴⁶ Performance scholars have identified a corollary imbalance in New York's "mainstream" queer performance culture, driven by repetitive representations that exalt "self-congratulatory queer identification—the politics of lifestyle."⁴⁷ The ascent of urban chic musicals such as *Rent* helped establish the category of what David Savran dubs "hipbrow," the folding of queer aesthetics into consumerism, typified by a "standardized, easily recognizable formula and a mystique of authenticity (or realness)."⁴⁸ It is little wonder that Lanzillotto's pointed resistance against the glorification of sexy urban detritus as stage set and her airing of (very unhip) afflictions do not rate high on the rotation for literary managers at theatres. This is the rhetorical situation within which Lanzillotto generates her work: confrontations with the "entrepreneurial city" of the late twentieth century, distinguishable from its historical precedents in part due to this capitalization of "queers as commodities" and the myth of gay affluence.⁴⁹

Her poems mourn the Saturday nights in the late 1980s when Lanzillotto would escape the "homophobic crap" of the week and revel on the dance floor at the Paradise Garage.⁵⁰ She worships the memories of these alternative social and performance spaces, not just as sites of fantasia apart from her family, but also as vicarious experiences of health. She is in attendance the night Paradise Garage closed—September 26, 1987—which also marked her "cure" from cancer: "five years of remission equals a cure."⁵¹ The next day, her brother,

CarKey, takes her for a ride in his Lincoln Continental and tells her that he knows *what she is*, and forbids her to go near his children. Lanzillotto despairs. “The Paradise Garage was closed. Where the hell was I going to go?”⁵² Yet the glitter of Manhattan’s rock runs deep, from Lanzillotto’s jawbone to the marrow of her compositions. “Me and the city/ Drilled to the root.”⁵³ The reader knows Lanzillotto will not go far, which, in Lanzillotto’s world, functions as both a privilege and the markings of survivorship.

CarKey and the other male figures in her family create a pathological bricolage of troubled veterans and wounded patriarchs who ghost her poems and stories. Yet throughout all of Lanzillotto’s work, her relationship with the city (and its five boroughs) outranks hospital roommates, siblings, and first loves. She rages against the dispassionate flâneur; her urban philosophy is best expressed through the sidewalk cracks and the crevices into which the saints escape. Her allegiance to the bedrock of the city extends to its “quartz and feldspar and mica and hornblende.”⁵⁴ This creates a contradictory twin narrative of rootedness and loss, for Lanzillotto is homeless—by some definitions. Exiting through the doors of Sloan-Kettering after a cancer treatment, Lanzillotto realizes that “the revolution hadn’t happened in [her] sleep, gentrification did,” and one poem demarcates her official characterization as ‘Homeless Sleeping with Relative’ on bureaucratic paperwork.⁵⁵ She has many symbolic, tertiary, and potentially spectral homes, including her ancestral homeland of Italy, artistic communities and collaborators, and, more to the point, a mother in Yonkers, with whom she lives after she is evicted. “Aborted by landlords,” Lanzillotto is just one more Nooyawkah who, she explains in the somber poem “Spirit Track,” “knows you don’t know New York ‘til you live in her street/ When New York is nine million/ doors and you have not one key.”⁵⁶

She responds to perceived municipal betrayals by seizing the performativity of language: her poem, “I Never York City, Vows,” enacts a marriage pact with the city. What better way to end her itinerancy than through a bond with a wealthy partner? There is no officiant—no Mayor Bloomberg, no Mayor Giuliani—just the city, its residents, its memories, and its landscape. She offers a playful—yet stinging—proposal. She vows togetherness through her old lady years, “black cane stuck in a sidewalk groove,” street direction set by the course of two rivers, her evening hours spent in “a night class in Religious Studies at NYU.”⁵⁷

But there is a problem. New York City chooses eviction over matrimony. New York City seeks “the rich, the healthy, the lucky/the white polite who want to come pursue a dream up my asshole/ who will give me all.”⁵⁸ Her “queer butch ass” belongs in Yonkers, on her mother’s floor, outside the city limits. The city performs a seduction, yes, but there exists equal parts thievery, its gifts at once everything and nothing: “sunsets at the waters’ edge, cultural freedom, a parade once a year.”⁵⁹ For Lanzillotto, New York is a city ghosted by precarity: birthed by the fissures of immigration, histories lived in sweatshops and linoleum kitchens shared by too many cousins and neighbors, the violence of neighborhoods buried deep within the cement, the comforts and hazards of a particular brand of closeness and intimacy. Lanzillotto, then, commits to a metaphor—or is it the delusional optimism of the swindled bride? New York City is her true love, but she needs the proverbial Sugar Daddy. She chooses the one who kicked her out “for a rich girl who could afford the lease/ the four fifty coffee/ twenty dollar pie/ 50 buck parking spot/ bottled water/ bottled dollars/ twelve dollar lily.”⁶⁰ Once evicted, Lanzillotto inverts the vow: she vows not to another, but to herself, and to the redemptive acts that might sustain her. Not to a home, but hopefully, the basics: she commits to listen to corner love stories, to write, to speak, to make performance—to give a *ffffuck*.⁶¹ There is, of course, nothing basic about this: as José Esteban Muñoz wrote in his article about artist Mark Morrisroe, “enduring is nothing like a minimalist practice.”⁶² Lanzillotto’s writing is the revenge of the

jilted lover/resident/survivor—she is unforgiving in her accounting of the painful protocols of eviction.

Certainly, there are parallels between the rejection of Lanzillotto's desires, her exclusion from the city, and the burdens of cancer survivorship. Her desperation for marriage itself appears absurd—naïve, even—as we are reminded of her medical needs and her homelessness, both serious and sustained. Uninterested in her attempts to barter her service as an artist to the community in return for a home, the city instead insists upon its principles of late-capitalist exchange. Faced with the potential re-enactment of the transatlantic movement of her immigrant grandmother, the narrative of the past is threatened with a reversal of supposed generational progress. Her object of desire brutally tells her, “Not even your corpse has a place/ within the walls of this city.”⁶³

Talk of corpses is prevalent in theories crystallizing the precarity of our hyper-capitalist moment, particularly as expressed in global cities—and, more specifically, a brand of neoliberal governance in New York City that has pursued a vision of the city as a corporation and luxury product.⁶⁴ If the coupling of neoliberal politics with queer cultural discourses births a pure vision of globalized gay (often male) consumerism,⁶⁵ one underbelly of this phenomenon is the queer precariat as a byproduct of uneven development.

Poverty and Precarity

Lanzillotto is among the invisible poor whose “outing” produces a mode of seeing that reveals a life on the edge of disappearance.⁶⁶ Her writings about gentrification, for example, do not hinge on a nostalgic cry for visibility and resurrection—mom and pop stores!—but a fight against corporeal vanishing, including her own. As a consequence, all of Lanzillotto's restless investigations—one-woman shows, site-specific installations, a print memoir and an album of music recorded with her eponymous band—evidence her ability to both thrive from and bristle at her inabilities: to escape her home and its many pasts, her body and its afflictions.

When set in the context of Lanzillotto's previous performance work and writing, her recent video ephemera function as poetically urgent distillations of her theatrical explorations into the nature of the city's working class histories, when she intoned pushcart peddlers and block ice deliverers. The video logs express the place-specific conflicts and consistencies across four decades of afflictions in the neoliberal city. The unedited video clips serve as letters from the front lines of low-income patient rights, and showcase the tactics of a queer artist/survivor foundering in her home city. Paired with an occasionally winking title—“LIVE From Sloan-Kettering!”—these intimate documents tunnel through the veneers of policy debates to expose the limits of support systems and the raw moments of daily resistance required to survive chronic illness. In one, filmed in a hallway at Sloan-Kettering Memorial Hospital, she performs the labor of breathing by walking one lap around the fifteenth floor, a task that consumes nearly two minutes of full effort. She is conspicuously alone in these moments, a patient of a post-apocalyptic ward in which the quarantined, left without attendants, turn instead to the affective power of the Internet. The Annie Lanzillotto appearing live! at Sloan-Kettering may just be her most thoroughly New York character yet. It is certainly the character most indelible to the city that once never slept, but now never retreats: a cosmopolitan city, a global city, a consumerist city, an occupied city, a neoliberal city, a gentrified city, and home.

This character borrows from and trades in the theatricality of her various faiths: Catholicism, creativity, and the affective and ethical demands of New York City. “Could this miracle happen daily in my neighborhood/ and I not know?” she writes in “Spirit Track.”⁶⁷ In *Tony n Tina's Wedding*, Lanzillotto deliberately heightens her performance of

Grandma Nunzio, but its power, the *Times* suggests, is in its authenticity. Likewise, we cannot ever be sure where the performance begins or ends in Lanzillotto's YouTube videos; we know she resides in her mother's house, undergoes the traumas she describes, and we believe that this will continue when the camera is turned off. But this is also how Lanzillotto poses questions of faith within the discomforts of her work: she creates fictional representations not just for survival, but also for political ends, to believe that there are solutions—and salvation—within the experience of precarity.

On an individual level, the jump from precarity to spirituality is not uncommon; it is worth keeping in mind that the very term "precarity" now in use within academic discourses has its root in the religious thought. Lanzillotto, raised with the specters and symbols of Italian-American Roman Catholicism, communicates spirituality through what I describe as the "holy visceral." She lifts the city "above the streetlights," longing for a miracle prescribed by the unknown saints whose names adorned her Bronx streets. Catholic imagery is incorporated alongside Lanzillotto's visceral responses to the changes of her city—Manhattan's destiny, she insists, is glitter. Her North may be suffering, but her South is *Acquaviva*, and the aching for her rural ancestors never leaves Lanzillotto (whose maternal grandmother never understood her focus on education and her ignorance of the "basics"). As the reader thumbs through photographs accompanying her memoir, Lanzillotto's religious upbringing is foregrounded to a surprising degree: Lanzillotto with Sister Rosaria and Father Calderola at Santa Maria School, 1969; her mother's Bronx Baptism certificate from Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, 1927; Lanzillotto with her oratorical coach, Sister Raymond Aloysius at the Yonkers Memorial Day Parade, 1977; Lanzillotto and a friend at a March on Washington holding their banner, "Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer," 1983. The message is deceptive; while on the one hand the visuals provide another paean to the cultural signposts of her Bronx childhood, I would argue for an alternate reading, an ecumenical slant on precarity that is not as often revealed.

In the May 1952 issue of *The Catholic Worker*, the radical pacifist nun, Dorothy Day, published an article, "Poverty and Precarity." Day observed that it was hard to write about poverty when faced with her community: immigrant families living in basement rooms and working in sweatshops all day, with furniture piling in her backyard from nearby tenement evictions. Still, precarity is mysterious and complex, and without it, Day contended, one could not help the poor. Without precarity, everyone who boasted of escaping "the poverty class" would not see how far (or how close) they were to it.⁶⁸ All those who assumed that poverty could be solved with "good habits," or had a conception of poverty as "neat and well ordered as a nun's cell" knew nothing about the poor. Day concluded that poverty needed to be talked about if these misconceptions were to be redressed (but also that corporate wealth should no longer hide individual poverty). With this emphasis on vulnerability, Day maintained that voluntary poverty "is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend 'our American way of life.'⁶⁹ Lanzillotto voices this brand of precarity implicitly; she fears, broadcasts, and catalogues the mysteries and complexities of the condition.

"The connection between performance and religion is ancient," writes Janelle Reinelt, "but often under-appreciated in a contemporary context."⁷⁰ Lanzillotto's performances insist on a relationship between poverty, precarity, and ritual that is buried in the quotidian. It is inextricably connected to the moment-to-moment work of living with illness, of producing in grassroots performance traditions, of acknowledging and protesting her personal histories. She bears the material instabilities echoed in the lives of dead relatives and lost characters—the silent Mr. Cinquand, Amelia the shut in, forgetful Beppe, prayerful Uncle Gus, mad Aunt Apollonia, Grandma Rose, and Joe Zito and Gaspare, the elevator men at

the Triangle Factory. She bucks traditions and yet ritualizes the struggles of her descendants; she loves the city even as she painstakingly peels away layers of strife borne from decades of absorbing its blows. Evicted, she longs for home even while agitating for escape from the theater space or the page.

For many, precarity is synonymous with anxiety, not empathy or spirituality. Its dominant media representations take the form of *New York Times* neediest cases and extended Jacob Riis-styled photojournalist exposés—the rising ranks of homeless children, almost half of New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line, the widespread disappearance of jobs that pay a living wage. Yet even for artists and art scholars, the term's complexity is easily confused or diminished; does precarity feed the artist while poverty depletes it? Does Lanzillotto's output attest to Day's insistence on the grace found in precarity, but reject its physical, material, and emotional ravages? By harvesting points of connection between her identities, Lanzillotto operates within the Holy Visceral, a peculiar mode: without material resources, her devotion remains—Muñoz's "educated hope" by another name. Her poems, performances, and multimedia works are most profound when understood within this genre of self-styled blessings. Generating her own answers to the "loss of faith" symptomatic of her conditions, she sanctifies the inevitability of precarity in order to protest the inequities of eviction.

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Notes

Notes

1. Annie Lanzillotto, *Schistsong* (New York: Bordighera Press, 2013), 18. 
2. Dorothy Day, "Poverty and Precarity," *The Catholic Worker* (May 1952): 2, 6. 
3. "Live From the Nebulizer," accessed December 31, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHTy0xv1hlg>. 
4. S. Lochlann Jain, *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013). 
5. Lanzillotto, *Schistsong*, 78-9. 
6. Rebecca Schneider, "It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (Winter 2012): 152. 
7. See Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). 
8. Robert K. Schaeffer, Review of *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* by Andrew Ross. *Contemporary Sociology* 38 (Nov. 2009): 599. 
9. Jasbir Puar, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Ana Vujanović, "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (Winter 2012): 165. 
10. Ibid., 166. 
11. Julian Brash, "Invoking Fiscal Crisis: Moral Discourse and Politics in New York City," *Social Text* 76 (Fall 2003): 67. 
12. Ibid., 70. 
13. James Parrott, et al., "The State of Working New York: The Illusion of Prosperity," Fiscal Policy Institute, September 1999, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://fiscalpolicy.org/state-of-working-new-york-1999>. 

14. Michael Barbaro and David W. Chen, "DeBlasio is Elected New York City Mayor in a Landslide," *New York Times*, November 5, 2013, accessed January 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/nyregion/de-blasio-is-elected-new-york-city-mayor.html>. For more on income equality in the city, see New York City Comptroller's Office, "Income Inequality in New York City" (May 2012), accessed December 1, 2013, comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/.../NYC_IncomeInequality_v17.pdf. The report concluded that the city's long-term trend towards greater inequality in income distribution is similar to the nation as a whole, but that some differences intensify characteristics of the national trend. For resources on global inequality, see Charles M. Sennott et al., "The Great Divide: Global Income Inequality and Its Costs," *GlobalPost* (2013), accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/special-reports/global-income-inequality-great-divide-globalpost>. According to data compiled by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States has a higher degree of income inequality than almost any other developed country. 
15. While gentrification dates back to the 1950s, it was in the late 1970s that it surged. Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith, "The Changing State of Gentrification," *Journal of Economic and Social Geography* 92 (November 2001): 464-77. 
16. *Ibid.*, 468. 
17. Annie Lanzillotto, "The Flat Earth: WheredaFFFhuck Did New York Go?" (unpublished playscript, courtesy of the playwright, 2008), 2. 
18. Ann Markusen, "Urban Development and the Politics of a Creative Class: Evidence from the Study of Artists," *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 1921-40. For an overview of the major themes in debates over New York's creative economy and so-called "knowledge-based industries," see a recent panel with CUNY Graduate Center geographer David Harvey, Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, and former president of the NYC Economic Development Corporation Seth W. Pinsky. "What are the Economics of the Creative Economy?" accessed January 4, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow5yjb-r0Dk>. For nuanced examinations of the processes that result in large-scale displacement of lower-income residents, see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996); Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010). For a summary of prominent writings on the topic of artist displacement, see Mike Muller, "Artist Displacement," *Gotham Gazette* (Nov 2006), <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/arts/20061121/1/2043>, accessed January 4, 2013. 
19. Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider, "Precarity and Performance: An Introduction," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (Winter 2012): 7. See also, Shannon Jackson, "Just-in-Time: Performance and the Aesthetics of Precarity," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (Winter 2012): 10-31. 
20. David Byrne, "If the 1% Stifles New York's Creative Talent, I'm Out of Here," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2013, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/07/new-york-1percent-stifles-creative-talent>. 

21. See, for example, Moby, "I Left New York for LA Because Creativity Requires the Freedom to Fail," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2014, accessed January 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/03/leave-new-york-for-los-angeles>; Alex Williams, "The Long Goodbye," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2013, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/fashion/From-Joan-Didion-to-Andrew-Sullivan-some-writers-leave-behind-letters-when-they-leave-new-york-city.html>; Miriam Kreinin Souccar, "Artists Fleeing the City," *Crains New York*, November 14, 2010, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20101114/FREE/311149985>; Jeremiah's Vanishing New York, "Find a New City," May 3, 2010, accessed January 1, 2014, <http://vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2010/05/find-new-city.html>. 

22. Dixon Place commissioned *Flat Earth*, and it opened their summer-long celebration of queer performance in June of 2008. Audrey Kindred and Caitlin Michener accompanied Lanzillotto in performance. Will McAdams was co-director and script consultant. Earlier versions of many poems in *Schistsong* appear in this unpublished script. 

23. Baz Kershaw, "Performance, Community, Culture," in *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 136. 

24. Lanzillotto, "Flat Earth," 3. 

25. "Annie on the Mailbox," accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aesfExomgmc&feature=c4-overview&list=UU1cDiWf-SpDFtC6HMxb842w>. My description of the second half of *The Flat Earth* is based on this video clip and an unreleased video, courtesy of Lanzillotto. 

26. For more on Lower East Side development, see Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000); David Gonzales, "Forty Years of Growth, Except Where It Was Expected," *New York Times*, August 27, 2007; and Juan Gonzalez, "Lower East Side Rezone Plan Another Mike Boondoggle," *Daily News*, July 16, 2008. 

27. Author's interview with Lanzillotto, 13 October 2008. 

28. Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 138. 

29. Lanzillotto, *L is for Lion*, 323-24. 

30. Jain, *Malignant*, 51. Her book describes the intense "cancer burden" suffered by younger people due to fewer savings, potential job discrimination and loss, and a high rate of bankruptcy (50-2). 

31. Tony N' Tina's Wedding, www.tonylovestina.com, accessed June 1, 2014. 

32. David Gonzalez, "A Role That Blurs the Line Between Drama and Reality," *New York Times*, May 25, 2014, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/26/nyregion/blurring-the-line-between-drama-and-reality.html? r=0>. 

33. "Live from the Nebulizer." 

34. Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women and Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 12 (2009): 278. 

35. Rose Galvin, "Disturbing Notions of Chronic Illness and Individual Responsibility: Towards a Genealogy of Morals," *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social*

36. Ibid., 117. [D](#)
37. A 2009 Williams Institute study found that poverty rates for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are as high or higher than rates for heterosexual adults, with higher rates of being uninsured. The study also found that lesbian couples have higher poverty rates than either different-sex couples or gay male couples. Randy Albelda, et al., "Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community," *The Williams Institute* (March 1, 2009), accessed December 6, 2013, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uclalaw/williams/albelda>. [D](#)
38. Jill H. Casid, "Handle with Care," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (Winter 2012): 123. [D](#)
39. Lanzillotto, *Schistsong*, 8. [D](#)
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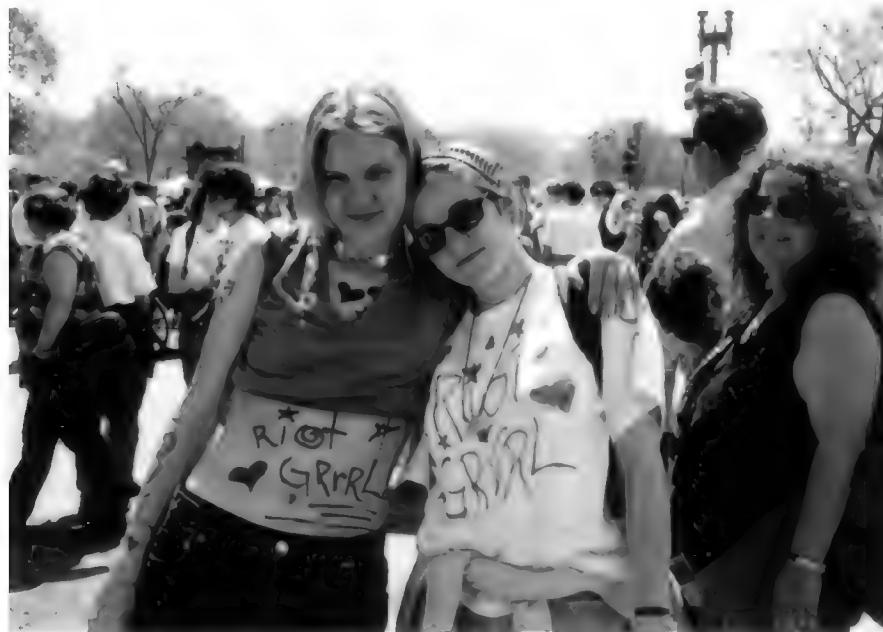
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I Can Sell My Body If I Wanna: Riot Grrrl Body Writing and Performing Shameless Feminist Resistance

Leah Perry

ABSTRACT Leah Perry presents a feminist history of Riot Grrrl and Kathleen Hanna in order to explore the hope and the limits of an individualist revolution in the 1990s. Perry takes on the performance of shamelessness, embodied in Hanna's songs as well as through bodywriting, sex work, zine production, and other aspects of the riot grrrl movement. Ultimately Perry exposes the position of these performances: they are alternative youth culture for certain subjects which both work against and from within the structures of neoliberalism. Perry concludes that shamelessness might remain a promising space for an urgent anti-racist, feminist politics, if it can work to destabilize power and center women from oppressed groups.



"I can sell my body if I wanna," shamelessly snarled Kathleen Hanna, front woman of the 1990s feminist punk band Bikini Kill and cofounder of the riot grrrl movement, in the song "Jigsaw Youth." A movement intentionally vague so as to be inclusive, riot grrrl's impetus was to combat patriarchy and to empower young women to connect with one another and take up space in unprecedented ways, in the punk scene and in the world. The band that aimed to create a participatory feminist youth culture that would change society¹ and the grassroots movement that it was a part of used consciousness raising, creative resistance, and cultural production to realize its goals. While specific methods varied, reflecting both a political commitment to fluidity and plurality and the neoliberal ideology of

individualism and “personal responsibility,” the performance of shamelessness underscored this movement of feminist resistance.

Many of riot grrrl’s methods have been polemical. On one hand, “riot grrrls foreground girl identity, in its simultaneous audacity and awkwardness—and not just girl, but a defiant ‘grrrl’ identity that roars back at the dominant culture.”² Defying the male gaze by shamelessly embracing sexuality was a form of self-definition appropriate to a movement that viewed sociocultural reappropriation, personal transgression, and personal transformation as revolutionary (which the name “riot grrrl” suggests). On the other hand, reappropriating the norms of femininity was a fraught process that was delimited by white middle-class privilege, and the focus on individual transformation reflected a neoliberal framing of the failure to take “personal responsibility” as the cause of inequality, oppression, and violence. Leaving the structural sources of inequality, oppression, and violence intact, this reduces transformation to an individualized project. Riot grrrl was also criticized for perpetuating patriarchal objectification by embracing sexuality in some conventional ways, such as through stripping and other forms of sex work.

Riot grrrl also galvanized young women, evident in interviews with and in the cultural productions of its members, the increasing prevalence and variety of female musicians, girls’ rock camps, the proliferation of academic and popular writing on riot grrrl, and ongoing feminist activism on the ground, in the academy, and online. Hanna has also had success with her subsequent bands Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin, and was recently immortalized in 2013 biopic *The Punk Singer*. The place of riot grrrl in US feminisms is unequivocal, and today its legacy (and prevalence in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies syllabi) connects new generations to the movement and continues to influence and inspire its veterans. At the time of writing, searching the George Mason University library database for “riot grrrl” produced 743 hits; entering it into Google produced 1,030,000 and there are numerous extant riot grrrl or riot grrrl-inspired groups throughout the world. One could hardly say that (the initial) riot grrrl movement did not have some salutary impact on the lives of many young women.

This essay has three goals. First, by focusing on word reclamation via body writing, it examines how riot grrrl attempted to utilize the performance of shamelessness—that is, the performance of alternative forms of young female value—to resist patriarchy and the brutalities of neoliberal capitalism. Second, it shows how riot grrrl performances—on stage, in other cultural production, and in the daily lives of young women—also inadvertently *embraced* neoliberal tropes. I argue that while riot grrrl performances of shamelessness resisted the gendered politics of respectability, they did so in a way that was not accessible to women of color, who historically have been already cast as hypersexual and sexually deviant; women of color did not have the same binary between being respectable or disrespectful. In failing to consider how women of color have been shamed as hypersexual and sexually deviant, these practices recuperated white privilege and class privilege in ways that are characteristically neoliberal. In other words, in eschewing white privilege and also middle class privilege—specifically in relation to individualized/individuals’ performances of shamelessness via body writing—riot grrrls supported (or at least failed to undermine) neoliberal hegemony.

At the same time, understanding media and performance as polysemous sites where there is an ongoing negotiation of meaning between institutions, texts, and audiences,³ and in the spirit of riot grrrl, I am interested in the productive potential (if any) of performing shamelessness. Thus, finally, this essay is a call to action or at least a call for a discussion around the perils and possibilities of shamelessness. Is performing shamelessness an untenable form of feminist resistance? Are there ways that

shamelessness can be revised or reconstituted to be truly accessible, and thus to effectively roar back at racism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism?

Why Shame/lessness, Why Then?

Shame as a prevalent manifestation of the brutalities of neoliberal patriarchy galvanized young women in the 1990s; in accordance with Foucault's assertion that power creates and shapes resistance to it, shamelessness was a key method of resistance utilized by riot grrrls. While adolescent women, simultaneously dismissed as children and sexualized as women, have long been disciplined by discourses and practices of shaming, the punk movements and women's movements of the 1970s and the neoliberal conjuncture of the late 1980s and early 1990s set the stage for riot grrrl's emergence, and the movement's deployment of shamelessness. Given that my focus is on body writing/word reclamation particularly as performed by Hanna, I cannot do justice to these rich, nuanced movements here. The following gives just a sense of the contours of punk and earlier feminisms.

Punk, a series of movements that emerged in the 1970s, is described by Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth as, "a major disruptive force within both the established music scene and the larger capitalist societies of the industrial West. Punk was generally characterized by its anti-status quo disposition, a pronounced do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos, and a desire for disalienation (resistance to the multiple forms of alienation in modern society).⁴ Punk, which included independent cultural production including often loud, aggressive music, art, writing, and fashion, was especially conditioned by class politics and working class cultures in the US and UK.⁵ However, the history of punk and its manifestations is more complex than this common description conveys. For instance, punk scholars such as Dick Hebdige, Paul Gilroy, and Fiona Ngo re-place punk within a transnational context rather than framing it as something that was exported, like imperialism, out to the rest of the world.⁶

Though it was not entirely inhospitable to women and feminism, punk has also been widely criticized as a white masculinist form of rebellion. This is perhaps especially true of the hardcore subgenre, which came to the fore in the 1980s and often manifested a more specifically macho aesthetic. As Gale Wald and JoAnne Gottlieb note, "Among male punk and hardcore performers, there is a long tradition of this rebellion being acted out at the expense and over the bodies of women."⁷ While hardcore is not a monolithic subgenre, "its aggressively masculinist, mid-1980s incarnation stymies any easy historical progression from early women punk rockers to contemporary riot grrrls;"⁸ in fact challenging sexism in the punk scene was part of the impetus of riot grrrl.⁹ At the same time, the hegemonic history of riot grrrl as a response to patriarchy in the punk scene often overlooks the importance of women in early punk and post-punk music (Poly Styrene, Siouxsie Sioux, Exene Cervenka, Lydia Lunch, Nina Hagen, the Slits, and the Raincoats to name a few),¹⁰ and the ways in which early punk women challenged the male gaze by manipulating the tropes of disrespective or fallen womanhood,¹¹ a tactic riot grrrl inherited. Moreover, many young girls sought out punk culture as a supportive space in which to reject gender norms and resist patriarchy.¹² The standard riot grrrl historiography in mainstream media and often from members/within the movement itself overlooks these nuances, relegating the movement to a mere response to patriarchy. Naturalizing and commodifying gender difference, that narrative also treats women as novelties in accordance with standard practice in rock and popular music, particularly at a time when women rock musicians were a hot commodity.¹³

Conventional historiography also contains and downplays the issue of race, despite its importance in and to punk. For instance, negation of or distance from whiteness was often considered shorthand for punk authenticity, or analogies were made between

being/looking punk and/or working class and being a person of color.¹⁴ (Patti Smith's "Rock n' Roll Nigger" and the Avengers' "White Nigger" exemplify this.) Along with perpetuating the colonial fetishization and surveillance of people of color, such analogies reinforce white privilege by failing to understand racism as a social structure that places people in vastly different proximities to oppression, poverty, and violence. The contributions of people of color to punk have also been erased or overlooked. Relevant here is a special issue of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, "Punk Anteriors: Genealogy, Theory, Performance," that centers on "punk anteriors;" that is, as editors Fiona I. B. Ngo and Elizabeth A. Stinson state, the issue retells punk stories to reflect the "foundational disruptions" of critical race and feminist thought in punk music, ethics, and aesthetics.¹⁵ The writers in the issue remind scholars that women and other people of color were already creating punk cultures, aesthetics, and performances, despite the prevalence of white men in mainstream genealogies. For instance, Ngo shows how the imperial logic of the US in the 1970s following the Vietnam War "creates the means for understanding and producing punk's resistant subjectivities...For punks, this meant that the creation of resistant subjectivities happened over and against the real and imagined personages of Southeast Asia."¹⁶ Mimi Thi Nguyen, arguing that women of color were essential to the formation of riot grrrl, exposes the ways that the dominant historiographies of riot grrrl in mainstream media and within/from the movement itself contain the disruptions of race.¹⁷

Conventional historiography in the mainstream media likewise tends to overlook or erase the influence of lesbian feminism and queercore punk, though these influences are more visible within riot grrrl. Mary Celeste Kearney argues that the mainstream media narrative of riot grrrl as a response to misogyny in the punk scene reifies the movement as all about music and fails to consider the influence of lesbian womyn's separatist practices and community that developed out of the radical wing of feminism in the 1970s and included DIY efforts. Kearney shows that riot grrrl descended from lesbian separatist ideology that aimed to resist patriarchy by creating alternative institutions and cultural expressions separate from the mainstream. These included zines and independently produced music, record labels, and music festivals.¹⁸ Mainstream accounts have also elided the influence of queercore punk, a subgenre of punk that focused on the oppression and alienation of LGBTQ persons and explored gender and sexual identities. Riot grrrl and queercore bands such as Tribe 8, Team Dresh, Random Violet, and The Mudwimmin emerged at the same time, the two movements engaged each other and overlapped, and for some riot grrrl provided a refuge from homophobia in the punk scene and from the conformism of mainstream gay culture.¹⁹ Kearney points out that the erasures of links between lesbian feminism, queercore, and riot grrrl in media are "somewhat obvious attempts to distance this radical female youth culture from the taint of homosexuality."²⁰

The more mainstream gains and rhetoric of earlier US feminisms also undergirded the rise of riot grrrl. While a thorough discussion of the impact of earlier feminisms and particularly those of the "second wave" in 1960s and 1970s²¹ is beyond the scope of this essay, a very brief, general history provides important context. Riot grrrl was formed in a world in which the previous generation of feminists had gained certain reproductive rights (especially the right to choose abortion, with *Roe v. Wade*) and welfare rights; the fight for equal pay was ongoing. Riot grrrl inherited the tactic of consciousness raising, and with the second wave insight that "the personal is political," riot grrrls also inherited a powerful language to address the violences of patriarchy, to form a collectivity, and to assert autonomy. At the same time, the mainstream second wave agenda of equal pay and reproductive rights, largely the concerns of white middle-class women, alienated many women of color, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer women, working class and poor

women, women from developing nations, and young women.²² Moreover, framing the women's movement in this particular way occluded other important feminist efforts such as the work of women of color to secure welfare rights²³ and the DIY efforts of lesbian separatists. There were other points of contention as well. In the 1980s, debates over pornography, censorship, and sex work consumed and had divided the mainstream feminist movement. Andrea Dworkin and others zeroed in on porn and sex work as the key means and ends of patriarchy. Meanwhile, radical and Pro-Sex feminists such as Pat Califia argued the that women's relationships to porn, sex work, and BDSM were complicated, particularly for queer women, and could challenge patriarchy in exciting ways and be pleasurable. Pro-Sex or Sex Radical feminists, like many punk women, challenged the devaluation of women based on notions of respectability. Other feminists pointed out that these concerns were once again white and middle-class and called for attention to the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, etc.²⁴

Academic feminisms also both fueled and failed riot grrrl. On one hand, attention to difference and diversity (a legacy of women of color feminisms), an increasing consideration of young women, and the influence of postmodern theories of fluidity and the instability of identity (what would come to be known as queer theory) were becoming more prevalent in academic feminism.²⁵ Third wave feminists were influenced by and living the realities of such ambiguity, for many of them had benefitted from the gains of second wave feminisms and come of age in a time of extreme political conservatism and backlash. Many also grew up identifying as bisexual, transgender, and interracial.²⁶ On the other hand, many riot grrrls felt that academic feminism did not speak to their needs and was not pragmatic in terms of improving the material realities of young women's lives.²⁷

The neoliberal backlash against feminism(s) also influenced the emergence of riot grrrl. Karen Orr Vered and Sal Humphreys have canvassed how and why postfeminism, which is constituted through previous feminisms, is prevalent in media in the neoliberal conjuncture.²⁸ As an analytical tool, the term, "describes the political moment in which the material and ideological gains of second-wave feminism have been accepted and incorporated into our mainstream values and common ambitions at the same time as neoliberal economics and its associated social policies—including a reduction in social welfare support—have become entrenched." Assuming that equal opportunity, wage equity, and autonomy (the goals of mainstream second wave feminism) have been established, agency for change is placed on the individual rather than with collective action or on society; women are "encouraged to concentrate on their private lives and consumer expression as the sites for self-expression and agency."²⁹ By the early 1990s, neoliberalism, with its ethos of personal responsibility, individual freedoms, and consumerism, was ostensibly a postfeminist and also "colorblind" system.

Yet in the 1990s tangible proof that feminism was necessary and that women were taking notice was building. There were multiple high-profile acts of violence towards women in the 1980s, such as the Green River Killer's murder of over forty girls and young women, the 1989 rape of a female jogger in Central Park, and the 1989 massacre of female engineering students in Montreal by a man who, only after asking all the men to leave the room and then declaring that the female students were all feminists and he hated feminists, opened fire.³⁰ The Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991, in which the victim of his sexual harassment, black American Anita Hill, was interrogated and dismissed by a panel of white male senators, provoked new national interest in feminism or at least women's rights. With the 1992 presidential election, women's rights and especially women's right to abortion were under fire as the Republican Party collaborated with the religious right; sexual harassment and "date rape" were ubiquitous;³¹ and given the ongoing wage gap and gender gap in education, women and people of color were especially impacted by

declining income and standards of living. Although Susan Faludi's 1992 *Backlash*, an examination of antifeminism in the 1980s into the early 1990s, was a national bestseller, the moralism of the Right combined with neoliberal personal responsibility rhetoric to place blame—for harassment, date rape, violence, poverty, etc.—squarely upon individual women. In other words, postfeminist ideology conveyed the message that if women were experiencing violence, sexual harassment or any iteration of misogyny or sexism, they had somehow eschewed personal responsibility for their life and actions and should be ashamed of their behavior. Shame and shaming disciplined women and concealed the systemic operation of power in the “postfeminist” United States of America.

Finally, young women were directly experiencing the violences of misogyny and sexism. The neoliberal system's absorption of the rhetoric of second wave feminisms led to the superficial appearance and ideology that girls could do or be anything they chose, that feminism had done its job and removed sexist barriers. Yet as Sara Marcus puts it, teenage girls, “living some of the thick residuals of sexism the feminist movement hadn't managed to destroy,” had been told that they

could do anything *except* walk down the hall by the shop classroom,
anything *except* stop shaving their legs, anything *except* wear that skirt to the
party, anything *except* play drums without being exclaimed over like some sort
of circus seal, anything *except* choose sex and not get whispered about as a
slut.³²

In the wake of earlier feminisms, many girls had an awareness that things should and perhaps could be different.

Thus the punk movements and feminist movements and the complexities of neoliberalism set the stage for riot grrrl. Following Nguyen, as well as Ngo and Stinson's “concerns about the often unequal distribution of punk's resistant stances,”³³ what follows in this essay evaluates riot grrrl uses of shamelessness as feminist resistance, specifically through body writing as an act of sociocultural reappropriation and as emblematically performed by Kathleen Hanna, arguably the most visible riot grrrl. As has been the case with other iterations of punk and feminism, race-based exclusions and inclusions shaped politics and performances, though in dominant historiography this is erased or downplayed.³⁴ In the 1990s the erasure or minimizing of attention to race and also class occurred in forms specific to neoliberalism. As such, this interrogation of riot grrrl performances of shamelessness contributes to discussions of punk and feminist racial formations in the context of neoliberalism. My hope is that it will generate a productive dialogue.

“When she talks, I hear the revolution.”

Riot grrrl formed in 1991 in punk communities in Washington, DC, and Olympia, Washington, and from the start DIY shameless feminist cultural production was its primary method of resisting patriarchy. Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, members of the band Bratmobile, worked with fanzine editor Jen Smith to establish the collectively written feminist zine *Riot Grrrl*. Zines are homemade publications that include articles, art, poetry, fiction, and manifestoes that are photocopied and distributed. Simultaneously, Hanna, creator of the feminist zine *Bikini Kill*, which preceded the band, began organizing weekly “riot grrrl” meetings.³⁵ In the 2013 biopic *The Punk Singer*, Hanna said that the band, and the movement it was a part of, wanted to reclaim girlhood.³⁶ Although Hanna—who penned the lyric, “When she talks, I hear the revolution” for the *Bikini Kill* song “Rebel Girl”—has resisted her designation as the “leader” of the movement, I focus on her because she was one of its founders and significantly shaped its methods and legacy. She is the best-known riot grrrl, and her performances of shamelessness with *Bikini Kill* were

also the most visible; in fact it was she who inaugurated the practice of body writing/word reclamation. While many bands in addition to Bikini Kill were important to the movement, and while there were many 1990s bands involved in leftist political causes, in-depth exploration of all of these is beyond the scope of this analysis.

The grassroots feminist movement, which was intentionally loose, never centralized, and which proliferated all over the US and the world, was about politically empowering and mobilizing young women, particularly through independent cultural production that challenged notions of feminine respectability and disrespectability. Riot grrrl sought to create and sustain space for an inclusive feminism that could, as Rebecca Walker said of third wave feminism in general, “accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than defining.”³⁷ In fact Hanna pointed out in a 2014 lecture at New York University that the Riot Grrrl Collection at NYU’s Fales Library and Special Collections reflects intentional flexibility, with multiple narratives and types of materials,³⁸ and its inclusion in a library is itself a form of resistance.³⁹ Meetings held from 1991 through about 1996⁴⁰ provided a place for girls, most of whom were in their teens and early twenties, to connect and find support: meetings normalized the experiences of girlhood under patriarchy, taking young women out of the isolation of the capitalist narrative that there was something wrong with “me” that might be “fixed” with a commodity and/or more self-discipline or modesty or discernment or less assertion or aggression or feminism. In other words, these meetings, along with DIY cultural production/consumption that allowed girls who were geographically distant to connect, empowered girls to politicize what they previously experienced as only personal. Breaking silence within a supportive community of girls was personally transformative for many, and was meant to be a starting point for collective social action and political change⁴¹—though the latter did not necessarily follow from the former: as Nguyen has pointed out, what she calls riot grrrls’ “politics of intimacy” (that is, girl love and self-referentiality) had racialized, classed contours that upheld rather than challenged the neoliberal status quo. While I explore this in depth below, first I provide an overview of the movement and its practices.

Riot grrrl used a variety of methods to connect, support, and mobilize girls. As Hanna said, “punk is an idea, not a genre;” the idea is that we can create culture, and corporations are not going to tell us what culture is.⁴² Zines were one key way that riot grrrls created and disseminated their own culture. While the origins of zines are unclear, from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s (when the Internet began to dominate communication), zines proliferated as way to create and share information without permission, rules, or restrictions.⁴³ Zines anticipated the democratizing aspect of the Internet, in that at minimal cost, and without the interference of elite publishers and corporate gatekeepers, almost anyone could create and distribute a text that would find an audience.⁴⁴ Zines often looked intentionally crude, literally involving cutting and pasting text, images, etc., so that the form itself reflected a rejection of the “status quo of professionalization.”⁴⁵ Content was equally resistant: like most zines in the 1990s that aimed to exchange information,⁴⁶ riot grrrl zines were a way to form support networks and create safer spaces to examine and challenge sexism creatively, and shamelessly.⁴⁷ To challenge the “passive consumption mindset produced by mainstream capitalist media,” zines “intentionally attempted to interrupt assumptions about femininity and force the reader to reconsider how femininity and pleasure interface;” therefore, “zines are playing in the spaces between resistance and complicity and as such are creating third wave tactics.”⁴⁸ The zine distribution network Riot Grrrl Press was created in 1993 in Washington, DC, by Erika Rienstien and May Summer to combat the media’s appropriation of riot grrrl, while spreading the word about the movement, at minimal cost and zero profit.⁴⁹

Yet participating in zine culture, while more accessible than playing in a band, required leisure time to create zines, access to photocopy machines, money for supplies and stamps, and “enough self-esteem and encouragement to believe that one’s ideas and thoughts are worth putting down for public consumption—all marks of a certain level of privilege.”⁵⁰ And while women of color and working class women created zines, the zines that have received the most attention were disproportionately created by white, middle-class young women.⁵¹ Thus zines were not and could not be (feminist) utopian cultural productions, but rather were polysemous, their production (and consumption) both subverting and supporting the status quo.

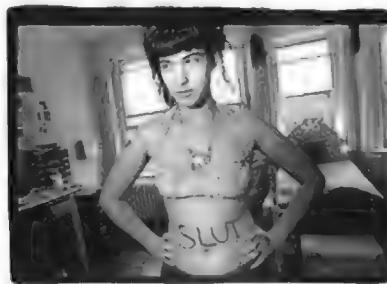
Music was also an important part of riot grrrl and was equally polysemous. Along with Bikini Kill, bands such as Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsey, Sleater Kinney, Team Dresch, 7 Year Bitch, Sta-Prest, Tribe 8, and Huggy Bear were also key to riot grrrl. Hanna, who was well-versed in feminist theory and feminist art history, formed Bikini Kill, her third band, with the same impetus underscoring the zine of the same name: getting her feminist message out to young women, and encouraging them to take control of their own cultural production. She put “girl” and “power” together to combat sexism and the feminist erasure of girls that followed from the 1970s focus on empowering “women.”⁵² Along with Hanna on vocals, Tobi Vail was on drums, Kathi Wilcox on bass, and Billy Karan on guitar. Like other punk bands, the sound was aggressive, energetic, and loud. Unlike most other punk bands (though part of the legacy of women in punk rock), Hanna and the other two female band members were at the center, boldly taking up space as they decried sexism and embraced aspects of normative femininity with their songs, words, and performances. Hanna showed young girls that it was possible and acceptable to be angry, smart, sexy, loud, and ugly in uneven and contradictory ways; being a young woman was all of these things. Communicating with women and men about sexism underscored all of Hanna’s art, zines, and music, and with Bikini Kill she did this by often singing to “an aggressive asshole male.”⁵³ For instance, in the song “White Boy,” Hanna calls out a white boy/man for treating women like objects and like they are “asking for it”—that is, rape and/or sexual harassment—with what women wear and how they act. “White Boy” assailed slut-shaming and sexist victim blaming, a facet of the neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility that so chillingly masks structural causes of rape, violence, and oppression. Unlike most music aimed at young female audiences in the 1990s, which tended to focus on heterosexual romance while affirming patriarchal norms, riot grrrl bands focused on violence against women and female empowerment via “girl love”—that is, connecting with and supporting one another.

Riot grrrl bands also encouraged young women to play in bands, and wanted women to be safe from sexual harassment and violence at shows. These concerns are evident in the riot grrrl imperative, “girls to the front.” At shows, women were invited to come up to the front of the stage and directly engage with bands without being intimidated, harassed, or abused by men in the audience, as was common at 1990s punk and hardcore shows. Interest in bands also helped young women to connect even when they were geographically distant. In this way, bands reclaimed female fandom as transgression and encouraged young women to be subjects rather than passive consumers, even if they did not play instruments.

Yet being a musician required capital, ability, and leisure time. Many could not afford instruments or lessons, could not spare the time to practice, or simply were not musically inclined. White cis-gendered women also populated most of the bands inspired by riot grrrl; this was certainly true of those that received the most recognition. Though riot grrrl’s culture of music was meant to be participatory and active, like zine-making, racial and class privilege circumscribed access.

Riot grrrls were also active in more traditional forms of protest, though personal transformation via a “politics of intimacy” and cultural production was at the heart of the movement. Many participated in marches and benefits (there were numerous pro-choice marches and benefits in Washington, D.C., in the 1990s, given that *Roe v. Wade* was under attack). Other actions included escorting women to and from abortion clinics, and distributing flyers and zines to women in a variety of inventive ways.

Body writing/word reclamation was one of the most controversial ways that riot grrrls conveyed their messages and connected with one another, and it encapsulates the pitfalls and possibilities of shamelessness in the context of a “politics of intimacy.” It is this practice that I am most interested in evaluating as an emblematic riot grrrl method of shameless feminist resistance.



**Kathleen Hanna of riot grrrl band
Bikini Kill, 1992 (photo by Linda Rosier).**

“A girl’s body was contested territory; this was a way to rewrite its meaning.”⁵⁴

At a show in Washington, D.C., in June of 1991, at the end of Bikini Kill’s first tour, Hanna performed with “SLUT” written in black magic marker across her exposed stomach; she shamelessly bore and thus reclaimed the label so often used to shame young women in a patriarchal culture that simultaneously normalizes the sexual objectification of women and devalues women for being too sexual or inappropriately sexual. Gottlieb and Wald observed that riot grrrl’s deployment of the body in performance functioned as an antidote to violations of women’s bodies—overdetermined femininity, rape, incest, physical abuse, and eating disorders, to name a few—in a sexist society.⁵⁵ Bikini Kill epitomized this tactic, as they

encourage[d] young, predominantly white middle-class girls to contest capitalist-patriarchal racism and sexism, precisely through acts of individual transgression against the implicit or explicit norms of “ladylike” or “girlish” behavior. The band linked these individual challenges to private (that is, domestic, local or familial) patriarchal authority to collective feminist resistance and struggle.⁵⁶

With her inaugural individual act of sociocultural reappropriation, Hanna established a paradigm for riot grrrl word reclamation as a protest performed through the body.

Body writing comes out of the legacy of feminist art history (which Hanna had studied as an art student at Evergreen College) and 1980s radical activism. Female artists in the 1960s and 1970s had made their bodies sites/works of art to call attention to women’s roles, limits, and possibilities. In the 1980s, much like advertising (and thus pointing directly to the role of commodification/consumerism in creating social injustice and violence), some feminist artists and ACT UP used images of clear language and words to convey their messages. For example, an ACT UP protest poster featured a photo of

Ronald Reagan's face and the word "AIDSGATE" printed across the bottom,⁵⁷ criticizing Reagan's lack of action and honesty in the AIDS crisis by likening it to Watergate.

Hanna, intentionally combining feminist art and activist visual forms, invited girls to use their own bodies to talk back to the politics of respectability and gendered shaming. Body writing was soon taken up to allow riot grrrls to publically proclaim things (about sexism, girlhood, and really any topic they chose) and to help them identify and thus connect with one another; in fact there was a specific call to do so in the article "Let's Write on Our Hands" in a 1991 "female revolution" flyer created by D.C. riot grrrls. While Hanna most frequently wrote "SLUT" on her own body, girls were invited to choose the words and images, such as hearts and stars, which resonated with them. This practice, which also nods to the straightedge punk practice of writing large X's on the backs of one's hands to signify drug-free status,⁵⁸ encapsulated third wave feminism's new attention to individuality while also helping young women to recognize and connect with each other, and helping those who were geographically isolated knew that others were doing the same thing. Given the impermanence of magic marker (as opposed to the permanence of tattoos), what one wrote could change and was thus fluid, making body writing an especially apropos act of resistance within a movement that embraced contradictions and fluidity.

Body writing was also perhaps the most *material*ly accessible means of participation in riot grrrl. It was free (one could easily use or steal a magic marker) and far less labor-intensive and immediate than creating a zine or playing in a band or even acquiring a zine or a tape; in that regard, body writing is a strong example of the punk DIY ethos that invites all to participate. Moreover, unlike zine-making and playing in a band, body writing is essentially outside of exchange value. While zines and bands may not have been motivated by profit, they were created and distributed within/under the constraints of capitalism, whereas with body writing there is no product or an organization of labor. Additionally, given that magic markers come in a variety of colors, it was potentially inclusive to people with a variety of skin tones.

However, access to body writing as a performance of shameless feminist resistance was limited by the socioeconomic systems that made it legible; body writing/word reclamation was quintessentially neoliberal. Angela McRobbie describes the neoliberal "disarticulation of feminism" in British culture, in which feminism has been reshaped into an individualistic discourse that reestablishes traditional ideas about women and as such combats the formation of a new women's movement. Women must consent to this in order for it to reproduce itself.⁵⁹ By failing to consider how race and class shape gender deviance, word reclamation via body writing disarticulated feminism and could perhaps be considered postfeminist, as it exemplifies a broader neoliberal thread.

Nguyen proposes that the movement's "politics of intimacy" and aesthetics of access to the means of production, creative labor, and expertise and knowledge "through which the personal and political are collapsed into a world of public intimacy"⁶⁰ reproduces white middle-class privilege, and conceives of change as an individual rather than collective endeavor.⁶¹ This model of intimacy was celebrated in early scholarship on riot grrrl, as seen in Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo's 1998 interview with several riot grrrls, published in *Signs*. The piece is tellingly called "Riot Grrrrl: Revolutions from Within." In their introduction to the transcript, they note that the movement "focuses more on the individual and the emotional than on marches, legislation, and public policy. This creates a community in which girls are able to speak about what is bothering them or write about what happened that day."⁶² For instance, eighteen-year-old interviewee Lailah Hanit Bragin states, "If writing is revolutionary, just being honest and talking about your life is revolutionary. If everyone did that, it'd change things. If you start to chip away at walls

that are within you, you'll eventually get revolutionary writing.⁶³ "Revolution" therefore begins and ends with individual awareness and action. Lailah even goes as far to state, "The revolutions are revolutions from within:" riot grrrl allowed her to change core things about herself and things around her. She does not specify what this latter part means, and the piece ends with her words.⁶⁴

Nguyen is not at all dismissive of the power of riot grrrl's new iteration of "the personal is political," nor am I. It allowed young women to realize that their personal experiences and feelings could be political and ideological; intimacy in terms of violence, rape, incest, and simply dating in a patriarchal world were explored in depth, and self-knowledge and disclosure, framed as opposition to capitalism, misogyny, etc. provided a foundation for connection that was accessible to many adolescent women. Additionally, intersectionality was not invisible, nor did all women of color feel marginalized, or at least not always. In Rosenberg and Garofalo's interview, for instance, Madhu Krishnan, who identifies herself as "an indian [sic] of American descent," the child of immigrants who "have done wonderfully well, by any standards," states that "the main thing about riot grrrl that I find so attractive is how it made me feel connected with all these girls from hundreds of miles away." Madhu notes that intersectionality is necessarily a part of the movement,⁶⁵ a point other interviewees noted as well.⁶⁶ Many interviewees likewise stressed that the movement allowed them to politicize what they thought was merely personal, and that in connecting with other girls via zines, bands, and online communities, they found community and hope.⁶⁷ Others made the point that the confessional form of girls writing about really personal issues builds trust, and is underscored by "girl-love."⁶⁸ This is ostensibly inclusive. Yet as Nguyen points out, the focus on aesthetic forms and intimacy

emerging during the 1990s to now, register how neoliberalism and its emphases on the entrepreneurial subject shapes even progressive or feminist adjustments to the structural determinations that constitute the historical present, engendering an emotional style, and a rhetorical practice, that sometimes glossed intimacy for reciprocity, experience for expertise, and misrecognized how forces work through these idioms.⁶⁹

The ways that shame and shamelessness functioned within the movement as modes of resistance are indicative of this neoliberal pitfall. Zines often included public "confessions" of privilege (white, hetero, skinny, etc.) and "calling each other out" on privilege was common. For instance, Erin A. McCarley, interviewed by Rosenberg and Garofalo, states, "I find so much more girl-love with girls who've called me on being classist or racist."⁷⁰ The confession of shame functioned as accountability, the confessor allegedly transformed by it.⁷¹ While "calling each other out" is a communal practice, it engendered only an individual declaration without any attendant structural action or critique; the acts of "calling out" and confession were themselves considered transformative.

Performing shamelessness via body writing and also sex work was similarly problematic in terms of its exclusivity and preclusion of structural critique and action. Women of color within the movement

wondered out loud for whom writing "SLUT" across their stomachs operated as reclamations of sexual agency against feminine passivity, where racisms had already inscribed such terms onto some bodies, and poor or criminal-class women argued that feminists "slumming" in the sex industry (through stripping, for the most part) as a confrontational act implied that other women in this or other tiers of the industry were otherwise conceding to patriarchy.⁷²

Failing to consider that women of color and poor women often lacked the choice to claim gender deviance as transgression, given that they are often characterized as always already deviant and disrespectful, white, middle-class privilege was reproduced. Body writing/word reclamation, a variation of the public confessional, also runs the risk of substituting an individual act for actual connection with a collectivity and social action.

MY CONFESSIONAL #1

The way that class likewise overdetermines women's sexual choices was also underexamined. As noted earlier, a "politics of pleasure" and prosex politics were one of the strongest threads of feminism in the 1980s into the 1990s.⁷³ Including and beyond riot grrrl, many third wave feminists zeroed in on the radical potential of sex work, understanding it as more than an instrumental result of patriarchy and focusing on choice (some women choose to do sex work), financial stability, and the pleasure and power that can be had in sex, sexiness and control of one's own sexualization. Like body writing/word reclamation, performing sex work was often considered "objectification as anticipatory retaliation: they were taking back that male gaze and making money off it to boot."⁷⁴ Hanna was a stripper and considered it a choice she had made, and many riot grrrls worked as strippers. However, the de-materialized rhetoric of choice erases the women who lack choice; that is, women who, because of poverty or abuse, and who were often disproportionately of color, had to do sex work to survive. Like gender deviance in general, it overlooks the casting of women of color as always already deviant; for instance, black women and Latinas are rendered "unrapeable" because of stereotypes of hypersexuality/sexual availability, lingering legacies of slavery and colonialism. Moreover, only individual women may benefit from the wages they earn, while the system not only remains intact but also is supported by their actions. The fact that selling her own body is one of the most profitable things some women can do also indicates that we are not a society that no longer needs feminism. Additionally, third wave prosex politics were quickly commercialized in a "do-me feminism" in which any sort of sexiness or really any choice a woman made could be labeled "feminist," even if that "choice" was to adhere to patriarchal norms. A woman who chose to wear conventionally sexy clothing to please a man, for instance, was framed as feminist. This is postfeminism, or the disarticulation of feminism.

Nguyen also shows how riot grrrl's politics of intimacy circumscribed productive, meaningful critiques of racism within a movement that sought to combat it. First, efforts to eliminate distance from racial Others with confessionals and intimacy (thus ignorance and distance are posited as the causes of racism) is aligned with colonial, imperial histories in which surveillance required certain people to reveal themselves so that white people could learn about "difference." This notion of antiracism burdens people of color as educators, and interventions are stuck at the "personal" level, at overcoming ignorance and perhaps making some friends of color. In other words, taking personal responsibility is, again, posited as the solution to structural oppression. Second, just as white ethnic feminists in the 1960s and 1970s asserted commonality with people of color and recent immigrants⁷⁵ and as is common in punk, with this politics of intimacy "the authentic (white) self is enhanced through proximity to the racial, colonial other."⁷⁶ Third, as in earlier feminisms, women of colors' critiques of racism were dismissed as divisive, and this characterization persists, for example in *Grrrls to the Front*.⁷⁷

Additionally, body writing/word reclamation was easily commodified in the mainstream media and could be considered an early iteration of "do me" feminism. This points to the complicated relationships between bands, fans, and the music industry and media that exploited riot grrrl for profit and the polysemy of texts and performances. While this

complexity calls for more in-depth exploration than I can provide here, the mainstream representation and cooptation of riot grrrl body writing is revealing. Summer points to the publication a 1993 *Spin* article that depoliticized riot grrrl as a critical moment that motivated the formation of Riot Grrrl Press. What cofounder Reinstein told a reporter was distorted in the article, and in the photo spread the magazine used a thin, conventionally attractive model to portray a riot grrrl: topless, with words such as “bitch” and “slut” written on her body. The political practice of body writing/word reclamation was thus presented as a fashion statement, and riot grrrls were portrayed as sex objects, their message domesticated and commodified.⁷⁸

On the other hand, negotiation of the meaning and value of media is fostered by the commercial logic of mass media (designed to be popular and “relevant” to consumers);⁷⁹ by the inevitable disruptions intrinsic to hegemony, given that it is produced rather than natural or given—“there are always cracks and contradiction, and therefore opportunities,”⁸⁰ and by the “wild card” of audience reception—stereotyping and marginalization in media may acculturate viewers to the status quo or provide them with a means to resist it.⁸¹ The mainstream presentation of riot grrrl may have introduced young women to riot grrrl and/or empowered them in other ways,⁸² and the formation of Riot Grrrl Press shows that it (re)galvanized women already in the movement. In fact, riot grrrls enacted a media blackout to resist the commodification and consolidation of their identities. In 1993, when the media blackout became official, riot grrrls agreed to share with reporters only the address of Riot Grrrl Press, so that information about the movement could still get out.⁸³ When some did opt to engage with mainstream media, they emphasized that riot grrrl was not about a particular kind of girl, *not about the individual* (which is what the media emphasized, usually in the most unflattering terms). Grrrls stressed that the movement was meant to be an inclusive, collective feminist revolution.⁸⁴

Body writing/word reclamation itself could also be considered polysemous. When, in the Q&A of her May 2014 lecture at NYU, I asked Hanna directly about her feelings about the efficacy of it, she said that at age forty-five she feels sad when she looks at the famous picture of her with “SLUT” written across her stomach because “you feel like someone is going to punch you in the face, so you punch yourself in the face.”⁸⁵ Hanna acknowledged that this was no game-changer; body writing/word reclamation did not alter the oppressive social structure that created a need for feminist resistance and in a sense it actually echoed it. Additionally, the signifier cannot be controlled; there is the “wild card” of audience reception, so that spectators might take this performance of shamelessness literally. These issues, combined with the white middle-class privilege delineating the contours of body writing/word reclamation, indicate that it is a problematic performance of feminist resistance.

Yet Hanna also acknowledged the power and possibility of body writing/word reclamation in terms of taking control of one’s own body, talking back to patriarchy, and forcing others to confront the male gaze.⁸⁶ I too wonder about the productive potential of the practice, if any, given that it does directly respond to and trouble the age-old patriarchal division of women into respectable and disresponsible categories that are always already racialized.

MY CONFESSİONAL #2

In accordance with third wave ambiguity and intersectionality, body writing/word reclamation invited spectators, viewers, and co-travelers to question and explore rather

than define. What is problematic is that it is a racialized, classed invitation that is accessible only to white middle-class women. Ironically, the reclaiming of pejorative words is connected to and part of the practice of minoritized groups reclaiming words used to insult and stigmatize them, as with the reclaiming of the word “queer” to signify a fluid, flexible sexuality and political identity that rejects binaries, categories, and the fiction of stable identity. “SLUT” was not claimed as a political identity, but it was another instance of the shameless reclaiming of a label used to discipline and control a population, a rejection of the politics of respectability, and an instance of girls taking control of their own bodies at a moment in which social institutions were working assiduously to interpellate them in perhaps new ways. It is a limited, exclusive tactic of resistance that gels with neoliberalism’s blindness to structural oppression (a la “colorblindness,” personal responsibility/the politics of intimacy, and postfeminism). But word reclamation through body writing was meant to expose rather than reproduce blindness and inequality, and it did rather directly growl back at aspects of patriarchy, connect if not galvanize some young women, and engender insightful and ongoing critique about the racialized politics of gender respectability. Therefore, is body writing/word reclamation entirely useless as a form of shameless feminist resistance? Is there any productive potential in the practice? Can performing shamelessness through body writing/word reclamation be reimagined and deployed as a viable form of queer feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist protest? If not, what alternatives are possible?

Smashing/Furthering a Neoliberal Agenda?: The “Daughters of Riot Grrrl”

The transnational grassroots SlutWalk movement, which began in Toronto in 2011 and is ongoing, is a direct descendant of the riot grrrl practice of body writing/word reclamation and its impetus to challenge the patriarchal politics of respectability.⁸⁷ As such, it is similarly polemical. The discussions around race and gender respectability that SlutWalk has engendered suggest that performing shamelessness could potentially be re-imaged in ways that meaningfully combat the gendered and racialized violences of neoliberalism.

The movement protests rape culture and victim-blaming; specifically, SlutWalks began in response to Toronto police officer Michael Sanguinetti’s remarks to law students. While giving a talk on health and safety he said, “Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.”⁸⁸ SlutWalk’s impetus is to challenge rape culture—that is, a culture that supports and rationalizes objectification of and violence against women—and its name is a direct response to Sanguinetti’s statement.⁸⁹ Like neoliberal culture in general, within rape culture the victim rather than the social system that produces and justifies violence is blamed; the rape culture narrative asserts that women are victimized because they fail to take personal responsibility to not look like or act like sluts; they are disrespectful.

“WHITE BOY”

SlutWalks usually take the form of traditional marches and may include women wearing revealing attire and with body writing words such as “SLUT” (though this is not required). Events often also feature speakers, workshops, music, dance, and other activities to create connection and community, all with the goal of taking collective action against victim-blaming and supporting the survivors of sexual assault, and with attention to how intersections of race, sexuality, dis/ability, and class make women vulnerable to violence in specific and often disproportionate ways.

Like riot grrrl body writing/word reclamation, with performance (in this case a public march) the SlutWalk movement attempts to challenge people to confront their biases and prejudices by calling attention to slut-shaming as a pervasive form of sexist violence that

is carried out by individuals and sanctioned by social structures. SlutWalk has also been credited with making feminism “cool” or at least compelling to a new generation of young women.⁹⁰ It has been critiqued by a host of women as well for failing to consider race, for simply perpetuating patriarchal objectification, for not rendering a proper structural critique of the sex industry and sexual violence against women, and for substituting acceptance of dress and the term “slut” and the act of marching for structural change. In short, it has been critiqued along the same lines as riot grrrl body writing/word-reclamation.

In terms of race, although the SlutWalk movement also aims to address intersectionality, it has been a topic of much debate among women of color and especially black women. On one hand, SlutWalk, like riot grrrl body writing/word reclamation, is predicated on gender deviance that overlooks the historical and present-day hypersexualization of women of color; for some women of color, an always already assumption of sexual shamelessness is the problem, not its antidote. In “An Open Letter from Black Women to SlutWalk Organizers,” posted on September 23, 2011, by Black Women’s Blueprint and signed by a number of organizations and individuals, the issues are made clear:

As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves “slut” without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations. Although we understand the valid impetus behind the use of the word “slut” as language to frame and brand an anti-rape movement, we are gravely concerned. For us the trivialization of rape and the absence of justice are viciously intertwined with narratives of sexual surveillance, legal access and availability to our personhood. It is tied to institutionalized ideology about our bodies as sexualized objects of property, as spectacles of sexuality and deviant sexual desire. It is tied to notions about our clothed or unclothed bodies as unable to be raped whether on the auction block, in the fields or on living room television screens. The perception and wholesale acceptance of speculations about what the Black woman wants, what she needs and what she deserves has truly, long crossed the boundaries of her mode of dress.⁹¹

Others have countered that this line of criticism falls back on rather than challenges racist patriarchal violence that de/values women based on a politics of respectability. On the *Ms.* blog for instance, Janelle Hobson wonders about the potential of reframing the movement with the use of the term “Ho,” to center the shaming term more readily applied to black women, and she points out that being “respectable” does not prevent a woman from being raped.⁹² Andrea Plaid, while acknowledging that SlutWalk “came off as another word-reclamation project that seemed to recenter white cisgender women’s sexual agency and bodies (sort of the way ‘feminist issues’ tends to reincarnate a little too often as ‘white (cis) women’s issues’),” was also concerned with criticisms of the movement that supported a politics of respectability. She too argued that the movement’s concerns and impetus did apply to and have the potential to empower women of color. Consequently, she chose to join the movement along with several other women of color and volunteered to speak at the then upcoming SlutWalk NYC.⁹³ Hobson concluded that feminists have not effectively taken on the splitting of women into respectable and disrespectful and “as long as that split remains, it will encourage the dehumanization and disposability of women framed as ‘sluts’ and ‘hos,’ while encouraging other women to be complicit in order to hold onto their ‘respectability.’” She asserts that SlutWalk “boldly”

takes on a word used to shame and thereby silence women “and in doing so, invites us to empty it of its power and its racist, classist, hetero/sexist meanings.”⁹⁴

A sustained discussion of whether or not subsequent SlutWalks can, as Black Women’s Blueprint put it, “develop a more critical, a more strategic and sustainable plan for bringing women together to demand countries, communities, families and individuals uphold each others [sic] human right to bodily integrity and collectively speak a resounding NO to violence against women,”⁹⁵ is beyond the scope of this analysis. It is worth noting that some efforts have been made to be more inclusive. For instance, the Chicago march was promoted in Spanish and English, and organizers expressed a desire to avoid the mistakes—that is, racial exclusions—of previous feminist movements.⁹⁶ This example seems to run the risk and perhaps did succumb to the pitfalls of riot grrrl and other feminist movements in terms of failing to *radically* incorporate the concerns of women of color, *centering* them rather than including them as add-ons meant to enhance privileged feminisms. This is what neoliberal “inclusion” and “equality” looks like: tokens of “difference” added without any structural changes, it is merely cosmetic inclusion or equality, the status quo enhanced with an update of “difference.” As Nguyen says, an important lesson learned from riot grrrl is that “feminist futures cannot look like feminist pasts, in which the interventions of women of color are incorporated as a brief disruption into a feminist teleological time that emphasizes origins, episodes, and successions.”⁹⁷ Whether or not SlutWalk can move past this remains to be seen, though I am in agreement with Hobson and Plaid in that it seems that the potential is there.

Moreover, the need for truly inclusive feminist futures is extremely important given extant riot grrrl movements. In the 2014 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article “Daughters of Riot Grrrl,” current feminist activists and artists, many of whom came of age during the 1990s and were part of riot grrrl or heavily influenced by it, such as the group Pussy Division, discuss their work as part of the movement’s legacy. A traveling art exhibit called “Alien She,” the title of a Bikini Kill song, is billed as focusing on riot grrrl’s impact today, and features women’s art, zines, and band posters. The Russian feminist punk group Pussy Riot directly traces their lineage to riot grrrl and bands such as Bikini Kill; riot grrrl groups continue to exist and form all over the world,⁹⁸ and the Internet continues to support and expand the movement. The curators of the “Alien She” exhibit, Astria Suparak and Ceci Moss, also invite viewers to participate in a riot grrrl census to map groups and to describe how the movement has impacted their lives.⁹⁹ We can do the same at <http://riotgrrlcensus.tumblr.com>. Riot grrrl and its performative tactics of resistance are still with us. So where does all of this leave us in terms of feminist futures?

Conclusion

Riot grrrls were indeed largely white and middle class, as were the movement’s concerns. This is the version of riot grrrl history that dominates; it is the version that is told as *the* authoritative riot grrrl history, and to an extent it is a history I have retold here. As noted, the movement was not monolithic and did attempt to address intersectionality. In response to accusations of exclusivity, Dunn and Farnsworth noted that many riot grrrls came from lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds; many were women of color; many in college worked to pay their way through school; some worked low-paying jobs, lacking time to produce zines and providing one reason for the formation of Riot Grrrl Press; many worked in the sex industry; and access to photocopying equipment was either the perk of a job or illicitly acquired rather than necessarily a mark of privilege.¹⁰⁰ And also, as Nguyen chronicles, women of color were a foundational part of riot grrrl, though that history has been elided in mainstream and riot grrrl accounts. Issues of race, class, sexuality, body size, nationality, and ableism were taken seriously by many riot grrrls. These issues were frequent topics in zines, at meetings, and at the two riot grrrl

conventions,¹⁰¹ though unfortunately this usually occurred in problematic ways that perpetuated exclusivity, privilege, and inaction.¹⁰²

Although intersectionality was not absent in riot grrrl, it was not *centered* or thoroughly theorized; instead, the concerns of cis-gendered white women counted as “riot grrrl issues.” Too often, merely acknowledging or talking about racism was counted as doing something about it. Riot grrrls’ use of the “self-centered language of adolescence” and the personal story in lieu of a narrative of group oppression¹⁰³ drew on and perpetuated the neoliberal imperative to take personal responsibility for oneself; it drew on a language that lends itself to victim-blaming, which was antithetical to the movement’s goal to empower women and combat patriarchy and other forms of structural oppression. Body writing/word reclamation and sex work were likewise individualistic and recuperated white privilege and class privilege in the midst of challenging the gendered politics of respectability. In short, riot grrrl politics of intimacy were neoliberal and body writing/word reclamation poignantly emblemizes this.

What may be usable for feminist futures is that riot grrrl performances of shamelessness via body writing were backed by the recognition that individual experiences were all systemically shaped, and the movement’s call for active, material resistance *as part of a collectivity* was not meant to be narrowly defined. Wald and Gottlieb, reflecting on riot grrrl performances as a whole, said (in 1994):

Rather than reducing the political to issues of self-esteem, riot grrrls make self-esteem political. Using performance as a political forum to interrogate issues of gender, sexuality and patriarchal violence, riot grrrl performance creates a feminist praxis based on the transformation of the private into the public, consumption into production—or, rather than privileging the traditionally male side of these binaries, they create a new synthesis of both.¹⁰⁴

Though more critical of privilege in her later work on riot grrrl, Kearney concluded her early study of the influence of lesbian separatist movements on riot grrrl by asserting that the movement was “formed to express rage and ignite female youth” to combat all forms of inequality and oppression, and was doing just that.¹⁰⁵ These evaluations were overly optimistic, given the racialized, classed neoliberal limits of riot grrrl’s “politics of intimacy.” But it seems that performing body writing/word reclamation had more than semiotic weight and has productive potential, which the embrace of it by the SlutWalk movement suggests. With radical revision that centers the complex and varied concerns of women of color and also queer women, disabled women, im/migrant women, and women from the global south, body writing/word reclamation seems to have productive potential. In other words, with radical revision that de-centers white, Western, cis-gendered women and is founded in true intersectionality and committed to following with collective action that takes on systemic oppression, properly radical feminist transformation via the performance of shamelessness may be possible.

MY CONFESSORIAL #3

Epilogue

Then, our attempts to reclaim girlhood were circumscribed by a failure to truly address racism and other forms of structural oppression. Now, the need for effective feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist resistance is as urgent as it has ever been, particularly given the prevalence of postfeminism and antifeminism and the myopia that a perhaps evermore-rapacious neoliberalism engenders. For example, there is the current fad of young women, including some celebrities, virtually proclaiming that they do not need feminism. There is a popular, best-selling book that promotes the notion of “leaning in” to negotiate systemic

oppression rather than trying to change it, and a host of other examples of postfeminism and overt antifeminism abound. All take up the neoliberal mantle of “personal responsibility.” And as the SlutWalk polemic over race indicates, the erasure of women who are not white, cis-gendered, and middle-class is extant within feminisms. We have much work to do.

Therefore, in the spirit of the riot grrrl practices of consciousness raising, creative resistance, and community building, I invite *Latera*/readers/viewers to engage in a dialogue about the productive potential of performing shamelessness to resist patriarchy, racism, and the violences of neoliberalism. Can or should shamelessness be reframed, reconstituted? How can young girls, and for that matter women of all ages, cis-gender and gender nonconforming, challenge the violences of patriarchy in ways that honor individual and collective experiences and do not recuperate other forms of structural oppression? What are you doing/what can we do to shamelessly resist neoliberal immiseration? What about your students? How can we help them resist? I invite you to weigh in and perhaps even create your own declarations or virtual performances of shameless feminist resistance.

At the risk of being (riot grrrl) clichéd, I double-dare ya.

My Confessional #1

I took up this practice as a teenager at my suburban high school as well as at punk shows. While I found writing “SLUT” across my chest or down my arm or across my stomach empowering, I was blind to the race and class privilege underscoring my use of gender deviance as resistance (I identify as a white queer cis-gender woman). It was only when I first encountered bell hooks’ work as a freshman undergraduate that I began to understand white privilege, class privilege, and intersectionality. I also failed to recognize that I had done nothing to overturn patriarchy, homophobia, racism, classism and was actually inadvertently supporting the status quo with my one-woman performance of sociocultural reappropriation. 

My Confessional #2

As problematic as the practice was, it provided me and many other young women with entry into feminism as action rather than just ideas, and it did counteract the queer-bashing and sexism that I encountered daily by improving my self-esteem and thus my willingness to take up space in the world. It also connected me with and eventually to other feminists, intersectionality, and more effective means of protesting structural inequality. With this confessional (as with the others), the problem of collapsing the personal and political, the private and public, in characteristic neoliberal form, remains, but I wonder, is it entirely problematic? What if young girls did not have this tactic of resistance? Without it, would I and other women of my generation be more interested in leaning in than in teaching to transgress? 

“White Boy”

There is arguably a direct line from Bikini Kill’s critique of slut-shaming nearly twenty years earlier in the song “White Boy.”

Bikini Kill - White Boy



The song, which excoriates rape culture, misogyny, and idealized respectable, passive femininity with biting sarcasm, begins with a recording of a Hanna asking a young man why he thinks women ask for rape or sexual harassment:

Kathleen Hanna: How do they ask for it?

White Boy: the way they act, the way they... I... I can't say they way they dress because that's their own personal choice.

Some of these dumb hoes, those slut rocker bitches walking down the street, they're asking for it, they may deny it but it's true.

Lay me spread eagle out on your hill, yeah
Then write a book bout how I wanted to die
Its hard to talk with your dick in my mouth
I will try to scream in pain a little nicer next time

WHITE BOY... DON'T LAUGH... DON'T CRY... JUST DIE!

I'm so sorry if I'm alienating some of you
Your whole fucking culture alienates me
I can not scream from pain down here on my knees
I'm so sorry that I think!

WHITE BOY... DON'T LAUGH... DON'T CRY... JUST DIE!

Bikini Kill, "White Boy" Lyrics *Plyrics.com* (accessed on August 12, 2014)
<<http://www.plyrics.com/lyrics/bikinikill/whiteboy.html>>.

My Confessional #3

A fellow "daughter of riot grrrl," I view my academic labor as part of the legacy. While I am decades removed from the fiery rage that underscored my actions and activism as a teen and young adult, my feminist punk rock fist remains in the air in new but consistent ways. In 2010 I taught the 100-level undergraduate course "Women's Voices Through Time" at American University, which non-WGSS students often took to fulfill a General Education requirement, i.e. most of the students were new to WGSS, new to feminism, and did not necessarily have any interest in the course outside of checking a Gen Ed off their list of requirements. I had my class of 40 students (39 cis-women and one gay-identified cis-man) read Sara Marcus's then just published *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. I was nervous the day of the class discussion given my biased relationship to riot grrrl as my own beloved introduction to feminism; I worried that my students would not "get it," and would be especially hostile to body writing /word

reclamation and the “ugliness” many of us intentionally embraced to talk back to sexism. I worried that I would not give them enough space to form their own opinions. Also, after spending a great deal of time considering the pedagogical and punk rock implications of doing so, I managed to not show up to class with “SLUT” scrawled on my body. In short, I feared they would be hostile or at least dismissive of the thing that so poignantly changed my life and really made it possible for me to be standing at the front of that classroom, and I hoped they too might be galvanized. I was also curious about whether or not they would find riot grrrl to be effective, particularly in terms of body writing.

I was pleasantly surprised to see my racially mixed, international students thoughtfully evaluate and connect with the impetus and the practices. After the riot grrrl unit, I had groups create zines, which they all did with enthusiasm. And several white and nonwhite students chose to perform revisions of body writing in their final projects (they were required to do a final creative project that “said something” about women/women’s place in the world, in historical context). Sensitive to the polysemy of the signifier with riot grrrl body writing/word reclamation, one female student tweaked it: she invited young women to write onto their bodies words or names that they had been called, *and* to hold up signs stating their responses to the insults and labels used to shame and silence them. She did a photo shoot of this on the AU quad. She reported that she and the other women (whom she did not know prior but who had responded to her call for participants) felt empowered by the project, and no longer felt isolated or a/shamed of/by the sexist, racist, homophobic, size-ist things they had been called. The women at least for that moment were part of a collectivity and aware of the structural nature of sexism and racism. All smile broadly in the pictures.

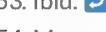
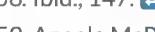
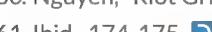
To this viewer, that signifies a familiar and powerful feminist shamelessness that directly talked back to the politics of respectability in ways that were meaningful to each individual participant. This did not overturn the heteropatriarchal, racist violences of neoliberalism. But it broke silence around sexist oppressions and its languages; its dialectical critique is a start. 

Notes

Notes

1. Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 272. 
2. Gayle Wald and Joanne Gottlieb, “Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution, and Women in Independent Rock,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Ross (New York: Routledge, 1994), 266. 
3. See John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987), and John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works* (New York: Verso, 1993). 
4. Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth, “‘We Are the Revolution’: Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing,” *Women’s Studies* 41 (2012): 136. 
5. Dunn and Farnsworth, “‘We Are the Revolution,’ 137. 
6. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Fiona I. B. Ngo, “Punk in the Shadow of War,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22.2–3 (July–November 2012): 203–232. 
7. Wald and Gottlieb, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” 252. 
8. Ibid. 

9. *The Punk Singer: A Film About Kathleen Hanna*. Directed by Sini Anderson (New York: IFC Films, 2013). 
10. Mary Celeste Kearney, "The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl—feminism—lesbian culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 218. 
11. Dick Hebdige, "Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," *SubStance* 37–38 (1983): 83. 
12. Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys Subculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002). 
13. See Wald and Gottlieb, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," 254, and Kirsten Schlit, "A Little Too Ironic': The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26.1 (2003): 5-16. 
14. Ngo, "Punk in the Shadow of War." 
15. Fiona I. B. Ngo and Elizabeth A. Stinson, "Introduction: Threads and Omissions," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22.2-3 (July-November 2012): 165. 
16. Ngo, "Punk in the Shadow of War," 204. 
17. Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22.2-3 (July-November 2012): 173-196. 
18. Kearney, "The Missing Links," 218. 
19. Ibid., 223. 
20. Ibid., 222. 
21. Scholars have questioned the standard narrative of "waves" of US feminism, preferring instead a more complex and continuous history. For instance, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* (New York: Liveright, 2014). 
22. Ellen Riordan, "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25.3 (July 2005): 279. 
23. Linda Gordon, "The New Feminist Scholarship on the Welfare State," in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 9-35, and Teresa L. Amott, "Black Women and AFDC: Making Entitlement Out of Necessity," in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 280-300. 
24. For path-breaking examples of women-of-color critiques of marginalization within mainstream feminism and a call to consider intersectionality to correct this, see Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1981), and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Race Reform, Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-Discrimination Law," *Harvard Law Review* 101.7 (1988): 1331-1387. 
25. Riordan, "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls," 279-280. 
26. Ibid., 281. 
27. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 90. 
28. Karen Orr Vered and Sal Humphreys, "Postfeminist Inflections in Television Studies," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 28.2 (2014): 156, 159. 
29. Ibid., 157. 
30. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 40. 

31. Natalie D. Smith, review of *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, by Sara Marcus, *Affilia: Journal of Social Work and Women* 27: 2 (2012): 227. 
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33. Ngo and Stinson, "Introduction: Threads and Omissions," 167. 
34. Elizabeth A. Stinson, "Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22.2-3 (July-November 2012): 275-314. 
35. Dunn and Farnsworth, "We Are the Revolution," 139. 
36. *The Punk Singer*. 
37. Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York, Anchor, 1995), xxxiii. 
38. Kathleen Hanna, "On Language" (lecture, New York University, New York, NY, March 6, 2014). 
39. Jenna Freedman, "Grrrl Zines in the Library," *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture & Society* 35.1 (September 2009): 52-59. 
40. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 326. 
41. Hanna, "On Language." 
42. Ibid. 
43. Jennifer Bleyer, "Cut and Paste Revolution: Notes from the Girl Zine Explosion," in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 4th edition, eds. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (New York: McGraw and Hill, 2009), 543. 
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48. Alison Pipemeier, "Bad Girl, Good Girl: Zines Doing Feminism," in *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 5th edition, eds. Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee (New York: McGraw and Hill, 2012), 499. 
49. Dunn and Farnsworth, "We Are the Revolution," 142-143, 146, 150. 
50. Bleyer, "Cut and Paste Revolution," 545-546. 
51. Ibid., 546. 
52. Hanna, "On Language." 
53. Ibid. 
54. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 147. 
55. Wald and Gottlieb, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," 268. 
56. Ibid., 267. 
57. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 146. 
58. Ibid., 147. 
59. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Sage, 2009). 
60. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 174. 
61. Ibid., 174-175. 
62. Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, "Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within," *Signs* 23.3 (Spring 1998): 810. 

63. Ibid., 825. 

64. Ibid., 841. 

65. Ibid., 815. 

66. Ibid., 817. 

67. Ibid., 820. 

68. Ibid., 821. 

69. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 177-178. 

70. Rosenberg and Garofalo, "Riot Grrrl," 825. 

71. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 178. See also Sara Ahmed, "The Politics of Bad Feeling," *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal* 1 (2005): 72-85. 

72. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 179. See also Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 65. 

73. Andi Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 132-133. 

74. Ibid., 136. 

75. In his work on the white ethnic revival that developed in response to the civil rights movement, Matthew Jacobson asserted that second wave feminism was dominated by white ethnic women who attempted to establish a sense of common struggle with women of color and recent immigrants on the basis of shared patriarchal oppression and a history of white ethnic immigrants' poverty, tenement life, and social marginalization. Matthew Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); 246-251. 

76. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 182. 

77. Nguyen notes that Iraya Robles, artist and member of the queercore band Sta-Pres, who was interviewed with Akiko Carver for *Girls to the Front*, pointed out that women of color are often expected to respond to and enhance privileged feminisms: "In Sara Marcus' *Girls to the Front*, for instance, unfortunately every person of color appears to be a big bummer for riot grrrl. We are continually narrated and approached, even in retrospect, like we're a scar or a painful memory for punk feminism—in that story, we ruined it. And there is so much more to our story than that." Quoted in Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 188. 

78. Dunn and Farnsworth, "We Are the Revolution," 147, 149. 

79. See Fiske, *Television Culture*, and Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works*. 

80. Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, and Michael Rustin, "After Neoliberalism: Analysing the Present," *Soundings* 53 (Spring 2013): 20. 

81. Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *The American Historical Review* 97.5 (Dec. 1992): 1381. 

82. Wald and Gottlieb discuss this possibility specifically in relation to *Sassy* magazine: though corporate, in their estimation the magazine for teen and twenty something women "attempted to popularize Riot Grrrl, without ridiculing or demeaning its significance." Wald and Gottlieb, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," 265. 

83. Dunn and Farnsworth, "We Are the Revolution," 151. 

84. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 235-236, 249, 257. 

85. Hanna, "On Language." 

86. Ibid. 

87. Rachel Rabbit White, "From Riot Grrrl to the Streets of Chicago: The SlutWalk Chicago Interview," *Time Out Chicago*, June 1, 2011, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.timeout.com/chicago/things-to-do/from-riot-grrrl-to-the-streets-of-chicago-the-slutwalk-chicago-interview>; Ray Flair, "SlutWalk is rooted in riot grrrl attitude," *The Guardian*, May 9, 2011, accessed December 30, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/09/slutwalk-feminist-activism>. 

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89. "FAQs," SlutWalkToronto, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/about/faqs>. 

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91. "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk," last modified on September 23, 2011, Black Women's Blueprint, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.blackwomensblueprint.org/2011/09/23/an-open-letter-from-black-women-to-the-slutwalk/>. 

92. Janelle Hobson, "Should Black Women Oppose the SlutWalk?" *Ms. Magazine*, September 27, 2011, accessed on January 2, 2015, [http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/09/27/should-black-women-oppose-the-slutwalk/](http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/09/27/should-black-women-oppose-the-slutwalk). 

93. Andrea Plaid, "Does SlutWalk Speak to Women of Color?" last modified June 22, 2011, *AlterNet*, accessed December 30, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/story/151390/does_slutwalk_speak_to_women_of_color. 

94. Hobson, "Should Black Women Oppose the SlutWalk?" 

95. "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk." 

96. White, "From Riot Grrrl to the Streets of Chicago." 

97. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 191. 

98. Samantha Melamed, "Daughters of Riot Grrrl," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 28, 2014, accessed July 23, 2014, http://articles.philly.com/2014-03-28/news/48634220_1_south-philadelphia-bikini-kill-exhibition. 

99. Melamed, "Daughters of Riot Grrrl." 

100. Dunn and Farnsworth, "We Are the Revolution," 155. 

101. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 250-251. 

102. Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 179-180. 

103. Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 90. 

104. Wald and Gottlieb, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," 268-269. 

105. Kearney, "The Missing Links," 225. 

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Issue 4 (2015) – Performance: Circulations and Relations

Queer Provisionality: Mapping the Generative Failures of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*

Alison Reed

ABSTRACT Alison Reed investigates the border- and boundary-crossing performance of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's TransBorder Immigrant Tool (TBT), an incomplete cell phone program that offers GPS, guidance, and poetry to those attempting to cross into the United States across the Mexico/US border. Reed suggests a provocation-based performance of "queer provisionality," revealing the aesthetics of oppressive power structures by juxtaposing them to social utopias. Interrogating the national neoliberal project of both US liberalism and US conservatism, Reed's essay is also a transcription of the performances launched around TBT, the social and political machinery set into motion by Electronic Disturbance Theater's failed utopian project.



TRANSITION

(song of my cells)

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán" (1999 [1987]: 33). The historical? The mythological? Aztlán? It's difficult to follow the soundings of that song. Today's borders and circuits speak at "lower frequencies," are "shot through with chips of Messianic time." Might (O chondria!): imagine the chips' transliteralization and you have "arrived" at the engines of a global positioning system—the transitivity of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. Too: when you outgrow that definition, look for the "trans—" of transcendental -isms, imperfect as overwound pocketwatches, "off"-beat as subliminalities (alternate forms of energy which exceed Reason's predetermined star maps). Pointedly past Walden-pondering, el otro lado de flâneur-floundering—draw a circle, now "irse por la tangente"—neither gray nor grey (nor black-and-white). Arco-iris: flight, a

fight. Of fancy. This Bridge Called my Back, my heart, my head, my cock, my cunt, my tunnel. Vision: You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me.

—Amy Sara Carroll, *Sustenance*

Prologue: Utopian Poetics, Dystopian Realities

Imagine hearing this poem on your mobile phone as you pause somewhere between Baja California, Mexico, and San Diego County on the US side of the border. Leaning into the vertiginous landscape of the Anza-Borrego Desert, punctuated by tangled branches, barrel cacti, and sage brush roused only by ephemeral windstorms, and endlessly unfolding against a horizon of striated mountains and unbearable heat, you see through sunspots the GPS-enabled compass rose on your Nokia e71's dusty screen (Figure 1). You listen for a sign from the looped poetry that alternately offers desert survival advice and sustaining words, "alternate forms of energy which exceed Reason's predetermined star maps." At the interstices of this messy interface your body reads a signal: 33. Steps. Forward. Your feet, leaden weights in too-tight shoes, manage the micro-migration. Northeast of you lies a transient promise of hope, stenciled in white words on a blue container, which you mouth silently with chapped lips: *AGUA/WATER*.

On September 1, 2010, neoconservative pundit Glenn Beck decried this poem as a threat to national security. Not surprisingly, Beck aired the [video poem](#)'s most provocative lines: "*This Bridge Called my Back, my heart, my head, my cock, my cunt, my tunnel. Vision: You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me.*"¹ Part of Beck's performative condemnation necessarily turned on censoring the words "cock" and "cunt" with loud bleeps that interrupted the video poem's audio track. Beck's outrage over this sexually explicit moment moved him to prophesize: "The poetry on this system will destroy the border and the nation" (Gharavi 2011). Beck framed the performance collective's verse as evidence for the supposed need to fire its creators from their university teaching posts. Performing his anti-intellectual brand of Fox News Channel's ongoing xenophobic melodrama, Beck conspired in making visible the high political stakes of poetry.



Figure 1. The *Transborder Immigrant*

Tool's compass rose provides directions to a Water Station Inc. water cache in the Anza-Borrego Desert. The screenshot is captured from the same Nokia e71 mobile phone featured here. (Photo: Brett Stalbaum. Courtesy of the artist.)

The poetic object of Beck's scorn was Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, which currently exists in prototype form as a GPS-enabled cell phone application meant to direct migrants to water caches and other safety sites along the Mexico/US border. Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 developed this cell phone application at the bits.atoms.neurons.genes (b.a.n.g.) lab, a research collective at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology. Based out of the

University of California, San Diego, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT) collaborators include b.a.n.g. lab director and artist Ricardo Dominguez, performance artists Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand, programmer Brett Stalbaum, and poet Amy Sara Carroll. EDT features Carroll's poems on the mobile devices as part of its museum- and gallery-based reception history, but also views computer programmer Brett Stalbaum's code-as-poetry/poetry-as-code. Stalbaum's GPS tools can be downloaded online as an open source alternative to navigation software.² Simultaneously a concept and an actual provision, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* circulates its code freely in order to amplify the accessibility of the prototype with potentially far-reaching effects. Centering audio recordings of Amy Sara Carroll's poetry as part of its intervention, the app pays homage to notions of poetic sustenance in the works of feminists of color such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1984; Lorde 1984) by offering heteroglossic poetry-in-motion translated into Indigenous languages of Mexico such as Mexica, Maya, Yoeme, Diné, and Náhuatl, as well as Spanish, Portuguese, German, Russian, Greek, and Taiwanese. In so doing, the tool's poetry evokes a utopian image of global fellowship. Like Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (2012), my evocation of utopia delineates a set of social practices and concrete performance spaces that imagine and enact other ways of being in the world, and *not* a naïve ideal world with its own set of principles, bound to re-inscribe the very problems it seeks to move beyond.

In their project's deliberately provocative utopian vision, EDT recruits unwitting political actors and outraged publics as the primary performers in the *Transborder Immigrant Tool's* drama. That is to say, since its conceptualization the tool's design has remained provisional and technically non-functional, but its poetry activates a political response as *performance*. The poem that Beck cites, Carroll's "Transition (song of my cells)," has been a flash point for the project since Beck's belligerent mockery of its final lines. He decried:

That is so beautiful [...] I mean who needs water, you know, when their souls will be drenched in life-refreshing dew of poetry like that. Oh we are in good hands aren't we? America this is madness and you know it. Common sense says we must turn the money off on this project and others like it.³

Underlining the popular conflation of the prototype's poetry and GPS technology, Beck's vitriolic address to his version of "America" encapsulates the key terms of the debate over the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT). Social actors across the political spectrum have disputed its functionality, its poetry, its alleged federal violation of immigration law, and the contested use of tax dollars to fund projects that put pressure on both conservative and liberal discourses of migrant rights.

In spotlighting the online media frenzy surrounding the tool as well as Electronic Disturbance Theater's creation of video poems for the project, this article—structured like a play—holds in tension the competing visions of reality offered by poets and politicians. Act I addresses Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance history against the backdrop of material realities at the border. This act also engages the *Transborder Immigrant Tool's* intervention in the victim narrative of much human rights discourse—putting pressure on the limits of legal reform. While a device that could potentially save lives will always remain an urgent project, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* does another kind of work: by including poetry as part of its technology, EDT interrogates the imaginative constraints on desire for change. The need for technical functionality sometimes dismisses the work of poetry, but in the struggle for justice, the absence of one perfect tool necessitates the strategic coalition of many. Act II closely reads the tool's poetic interruption of discourses of "illegality" in order to understand creative form as central to the tool's political intervention—particularly the possibilities and pitfalls of

utopian visions as they clash with dystopian realities, reflected in Electronic Disturbance Theater's activation and archive of digital hate. Through affectively charged reactions to the tool's technical non-functionality and functional poetry, Electronic Disturbance Theater stages its performance of TBT online. EDT conceives of Internet flames as a kind of art practice, because, as Carroll describes in *Vandal* (2011), "nobody talks about Fox News's Aesthetics" (67). Act III offers a theoretical framework I term "queer provisionality," as a performance mode that provokes dominant publics with its expansive social vision. Utopian provocations expose the artistry of power, or the aestheticized rehearsal of contradictory political logics in the spheres of the law, the academy, and cyberspace. Rather than romanticizing utopian potentials in artistic practice as a way out of a noxious present, queer provisionality takes seriously the work of exposing systemic practices as producing their own artistry.

Act I: Call of *El Otro Lado*

Since Anzaldúa's (1987) evocation of border culture as *una herida abierta*, Queer of Color feminists have understood borders as simultaneously discursive and material places for identity negotiation and meaning-making. The Mexico/US border, of course, not only polices racialized bodies but also locates a key space for the production and regulation of sexuality. Despite Carroll's homage to Anzaldúa's queering of the border in the poem that Beck denounces above, articles published on TBT systematically elide its queerness (Amoore and Hall, 2010; Goldstein, 2010; Warren, 2011). In contrast, EDT (2010) discusses the tool as serving a specifically queer function: "TBT's aesthetic, a poetics of dislocation, unfolds to queer the Nation's concretude" (7). TBT's utopian gesture—to queer the Nation's concretude—moves beyond the limitations of legal reform to an abolitionist ethics of challenging oppressive institutions themselves while also strategizing ways to move within them. As Dean Spade (2013) writes, fighting the law's injustices can be one "tactic of transformation focused on interventions that materially reduce violence or maldistribution without inadvertently expanding harmful systems in the name of reform" (1047).

On June 4, 2011, artist Marlène Ramírez-Cancio walked the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*/prototype into Tijuana via a tunnel from the US side of the border. This art event was staged as part of *Political Equator 3*, a two-day cross-border mobile conference. Of course, uneven and exploitative flows of capital secure the border's permeability for US citizens seeking thrills in Tijuana, for instance, but not for migrants moving to *El Norte*. Rather than ignoring the radical power differential, we can understand Ramírez-Cancio's act of walking TBT across national boundaries as an anticipatory act of solidarity with the UndocuBus movement, which takes as one of its mottoes "Migration is a Human Right."⁴

Beyond the desert, Electronic Disturbance Theater has demonstrated the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* mobile device prototype in art galleries and institutional spaces—circumstantially staging the question of the tool's functionality as academic performance. EDT members have represented TBT at more than forty international performance venues. In February 2012, for example, *LA Re.Play: An Exhibition of Mobile Media Art Los Angeles* at UCLA's Broad Art Center in conjunction with the College Art Association Conference, exhibited twenty-five of Carroll's poems uploaded onto four cell phones alongside other international "geolocated media" artworks.⁵ As its extensive exhibition record attests, TBT has generated much positive attention: Electronic Disturbance Theater won two Transborder Awards from UC San Diego's Center for the Humanities, which funds year-long research proposals that innovatively address the issue of (trans)borders, as well as the Transnational Communities Award funded by Contacto Cultural, Fideicomiso para la Cultura México-Estados Unidos, which was awarded by the US Embassy in Mexico. Rather than serving an end in and of themselves, these artistic and

academic accolades set into motion the tool's performative afterlife: the opacity of the tool's poetic intervention reads as transparently dangerous to cultural actors and commentators.

Designed to provide aid in the tradition of [Border Angels](#), [No Más Muertes](#), [Humane Borders](#), and other humanitarian organizations that provide life-saving water during long stretches of desert, the app, once fully operable and distributable, would ostensibly direct users to already existent water stations. However, during interviews about the tool (Bird 2011; Warren 2011), Electronic Disturbance Theater members cite multiple reasons—both unforeseen and anticipated—for the fact of its technical limitations. EDT's practical concerns range from operationalizing a cell phone model cheap enough for mass distribution and sustaining battery life to mapping a particular area when NGOs want to keep stations hidden as a protective measure, as well as preventing the devices from being co-opted as a means of tracking by *La Migra*. If a cheap mobile device could in fact sustain battery life over long distances to direct migrants to makeshift water stations, the labor of mapping and remapping safety routes would require constant communication with NGOs and circumvention of hostile Border Patrol agents. In addition to jingoistic realities short-circuiting hemispheric imaginaries, the material fact of GPS technology's history of bolstering the military industrial complex also threatens the tool's sustainability.⁶ In effect, EDT's material and political challenges cannot be separated from the dangerous potential for repurposing the tool as a technology of state surveillance and violence.

While Electronic Disturbance Theater members maintain that they originally hoped to distribute a fully-functional version of the app by April 2011, approximately four years after its first iteration, I am more interested in the concrete effects of a utopian idea; given these setbacks, I read EDT's insistence on the tool's practicality as part of their performance. Nonetheless, a series of highly publicized legal, institutional, and federal investigations indefinitely stalled the tool's development. These scandals, unsurprising in a political context marked by institutional repression and state violence, also halted migrants from operationalizing the tool along the border. TBT's performative life thus exists in the space of its provisionality, or the fact of its technical non-functionality; it is a powerful idea that because of its utopian ethical reach cannot fully materialize within the confines of US immigration law. Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance process explicitly embraces Fredric Jameson's politics of "anti-anti-Utopianism" (vxi), which understands that only the most privileged members of society can afford not to hope, or to think that hope alone can sustain a political project. Through the tool's embedded poetry, EDT imagines a world not circumscribed by arbitrary national borders. This utopian poetics does real work in the world, even as its technology for crossing the material border remains provisional. By staging political backlash as performance, the tool's non-functional technology and functional poetry together reveal the danger and urgency of imagining other ways to be in the world. Legal reform alone, however necessary organizing efforts remain there, cannot transform cultural realities.

Electronic Disturbance Theater's understanding of migration as a human right rather than a federal crime gestures toward abolition of the immigration control apparatus altogether as the basis for collective action. Legal frameworks, after all, often require the performance of particular kinds of citizenship that reify hetero- and homonormative productions of the US as a safe space of freedom, including sexual freedoms, at the cost of casting "Third World" countries in imperialist terms as arrested or regressive. In other words, part of the process of assimilation into citizenship demands the collective reiteration and reinforcement of a dangerous racialized and non-conforming "other"—the terrorist, for example—against whom the nation guards and defines itself, a point that

Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai (2002) make in "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terror and the Production of Docile Patriots." Toby Beauchamp (2009) extends this argument about national security and patriotism in light of the gender-nonconforming subject to critique occasions when transgender advocacy organizations have depended on defining a properly assimilated citizen against a fantasized "other" who threatens national coherence—covertly linking patriotism to race hatred through the anxious repetition of the racially ambiguous terrorist figure, a force to be expelled from the nation.

Given its performance trajectory from poetic prototype to legal liability, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* can be described as a work of conceptual/performance art that troubles public disputes about immigration and human rights law in print and social media, the legal sphere, and the academy—shifting the terms of debate from the security of the border to the material realities of immigration reform. EDT members articulate a poetic vision of border dissolution and stage a debate about migration in which social actors collude in performing their political aesthetics, which rationalize global flows of capital across borders while criminalizing the very people whose exploited labor makes possible the conditions of neoliberal production. Neoliberalism's duplicitous positioning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a democratic opening of borders deliberately elides the pattern of uneven globalization and systematic disenfranchisement that secures economic dominance over and through an expendable labor force.⁷ As Ricardo Dominguez states during an interview with Louis Warren (2011):

A Coca-Cola can has more rights of protection in the flow across borders than the people who make the can, who fill the can, and pack the cans [...] NAFTA seems to indicate that these commodities have [rights] and a right of flow. So, to me, transborders, trans-California, would be about an equation wherein the equality of the commodities would have a direct impact on the equality of the individuals who are the very flows of production there. (28)

Dominguez calls for awareness of not only the various violences underlying neoliberal policy, but of US capitalism as being rooted in longer histories of imperialism, genocide, and slavery.⁸ While many accounts of the US border myopically treat NAFTA's 1994 concretization as the defining moment in Mexico/US relations, a more nuanced understanding attentive to global racial regimes would reach back to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which forced Mexico to cede half its former territory) or even first colonization contact.⁹ The contradictions of a selectively permeable border depend on global inequities, outsourcing, and the exploitation of labor, which maximize the flow of capital and racially restrict the movement of people through the discourse of "illegality."

Reinforced by national moral panics around spectacularized threats such as contagion and disease, criminality, and terrorism, the racialized discourse of "illegality" has been in wide circulation since the US government criminalized undocumented entry in 1929 (Nevins 2002, 54). The mass detention and deportation of undocumented and document permanent residents on mere suspicion of being in the country "illegally" bolsters the conflation of "national security threats" with bodies not easily marked as white and conforming. Echoing Richard Nixon's 1971 "war on drugs," for instance, the affectively charged "war on terror" in the wake of September 11, 2001 heightened a longstanding anti-Latinx immigration regime.¹⁰ While the criminalization and hyperpolicing of People of Color is nothing historically new, the post-9/11 extension of immigration, detention, and border control authority from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and US Customs Service to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 exacerbated ongoing injustices around, and a rise in, mass detention and incarceration of racialized Latinx immigrants in ICE detention centers, county and state jails, and privately-owned prisons. DHS's coordination with

local police to racially profile and detain targeted groups compounds the alignment of criminal law with immigration law, reinforcing the domestic and border hyperpolicing of Latinx communities. The gross human rights violations of ICE facilities and privatized prisons have also been well-documented by the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and grassroots organizations, and include an absence of basic legal protections, such as the right to an attorney and medical care, and subjection to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse by Border Patrol, local police, and detention center guards. Ultimately, the alliance of border enforcement and criminal law enforcement bolsters the power of the state to mass incarcerate, detain, and deport People of Color in moments of moral panic and economic crisis.¹¹ In building their performance around the bankruptcy of the idea of borders and cages, EDT refuses to advocate for a reformism that merely humanizes state power's walls.

Framed as both art and activism while collapsing the space between them, EDT's poetic gestures simultaneously serve as artistic invocation of and political intervention in a humanitarian crisis set into motion by shifting relations of capital and racialized moral panics—the escalating numbers of border deaths each year despite an overall decrease in attempted crossings. One report (Moreno, 2013) states that from 2007–2011, the Border Patrol reported 1,934 deaths, averaging 386 people per year. EDT (2010, 3) describes that in 2009, the same year the US Customs and Border Protection Agency released its data on Boeing's virtual fence construction—a hugely expensive failed attempt to further securitize existing barriers—it documented 416 deaths from attempted border crossings during the months of January through October alone. Of course, as EDT (2010) notes, state figures are often deflated: "In contrast, humanitarian aid organizations like the Border Angels of San Diego/Tijuana estimate that 10,000 people to date have perished attempting to cross the México-US border" (3). Rising death rates can be attributed to the increased militarization of the US immigration control apparatus, a multi-billion dollar industry. *Los Angeles Times* (Marosi, Carcamo, and Hennessy-Fiske 2013) reports that

Obama administration officials claim the frontier is more secure than ever, benefiting from the billions of taxpayer dollars spent on border defenses. There are 18,500 US Border Patrol agents on the US-Mexico border now, compared with 3,222 in 1986. Barriers have been built along nearly 700 miles.

As if border fences and surveillance technologies do not make crossing perilous enough, migrants must also fear the growing numbers of Border Patrol agents, and not only the possibility of getting caught but the violence to which they may be subjected if taken in by *La Migra*.¹² TBT counters the government's massive investment in border control with the act of imagining migration as a human right.

While the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* exists as a prototype that has not been replicated or distributed, the debate surrounding the tool ignores its virtuality, the fact of its not-yet-ness. Beginning in January 2010 an investigation of EDT's supposed misuse of funding sources instigated by Members of Congress Brian P. Bilbray, Darrell Issa, and Duncan Hunter, and ensuing interrogation of each EDT team member by Audit and Management Advisory Services at UCSD, stalled TBT's development. Bilbray, Issa, and Hunter charged b.a.n.g. lab with using taxpayer dollars to violate the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which criminalizes border-crossing aiders at the federal level. Subsequently a series of investigations in 2010 by institutional and federal actors, namely, UC San Diego, the UC Office of the President, and the FBI Office of Cybercrimes, not only halted the tool's mass production and deployment, but also subjected EDT members to invasive legal protocols and online harassment from opponents to the tool, fueled by local and national media coverage. Bad press catalyzed these major setbacks for TBT's deployment. For instance, the letter Bilbray, Issa, and Hunter wrote to UC San Diego Chancellor Marye Anne Fox on

March 17, 2010 shifts between present and future tenses, describing the tool paradoxically as a “program that helps individuals illegally cross the US/Mexico border” but one that EDT members “plan on disseminating … to illegal immigrants to aid in their crossing of our southern land border” (EDT 2010, 4). Here, they collapse the temporal distance between “helps” *in the present* and “plan on disseminating” *in the future*. Ignoring its provisionality, they view the prototype as an active threat to the nation—typifying the warped temporality undergirding debate.

The University of California, San Diego, also threatened removal of Professor Dominguez’s tenure. He was hired as an assistant professor in 2004 for his groundbreaking work developing Electronic Civil Disobedience with Critical Art Ensemble. Then, Dominguez’s virtual sit-in performance on March 4, 2010—to protest widespread UC salary cuts, layoffs, and fee hikes—was deemed a distributed denial-of-service attack, warranting an investigation by the FBI Office of Cybercrimes. Drawing from his training in classical and agit-prop theater, as well as the practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience that he collaboratively developed in the late 1980s with Critical Art Ensemble, Ricardo Dominguez developed virtual sit-in technologies with EDT cofounder Brett Stalbaum in political solidarity with the Zapatistas, an anti-free trade movement of Indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico who led an armed rebellion on the day NAFTA took effect. In fighting for Indigenous rights against linked histories of global neoliberalism and colonialism, Zapatismo emphasizes the power of words, not war. Led by Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatista National Liberation Army famously staged the symbolic gesture of sending hundreds of paper airplanes containing fragments of poetry into a Mexican army base. This tactical move takes seriously the power of collective creativity in the ongoing struggle against systematic destruction and state violence. Linking Electronic Disturbance Theater’s performance genealogy to Electronic Civil Disobedience and Zapatismo underlines the significance of both digital activism and tactical poetry to TBT’s performance mode.¹³

In the end, all charges against EDT members were dropped, but the University of California Office of the President asked Dominguez to refrain from producing more activist work and to remain silent about the investigations. In an era that often portrays the university as a radical oasis, this institutional reaction exposes the persistence of the 1980s culture wars in which conservatives sought to restrict content of federally funded intellectual and artistic projects. A public advocate of the anti-migrant Secure Communities program, Janet Napolitano’s ascension from Secretary of Homeland Security to President of the University of California system provides further evidence of the university’s xenophobic agenda in censuring Dominguez. UC San Diego’s actions seem inconsistent: after hiring Dominguez for his hacktivism and virtual sit-in technologies, his tenure was threatened for those very reasons. The university’s response to competing pressures reveals the internal contradictions, gaps, and ruptures in institutional power as generative sites for social change. EDT’s work carves out a space for imagining how academics might risk and repurpose institutional resources to mobilize within larger networks of activists and organizers.

Despite the right’s obsession with the tool’s “immediate” danger, the media has simultaneously doubted its potential for efficacy—particularly how to reconcile TBT’s poetry with its activist impetus. During a trial run of the tool with Dominguez and Stalbaum at UC San Diego in 2010, journalist Evan Goldstein (2010) observes: “Our movements are punctuated by occasional bleats of unintelligible, crackly poetry. There is no discernible logic to the dance of its compass arrow.” Goldstein’s skepticism crystallizes as he observes Dominguez’s supposed digital incorrectness, a term which refers to crossing the line from hacktivism to cybercrime, but which Goldstein (2010) defines as

deliberately inefficient: "His creations are 'digitally incorrect,' he told me in April, by which he meant deliberately inefficient... They are, in short, conversation pieces." In relegating TBT's performance to the space of a conversation piece, Goldstein betrays a healthy amount of doubt about whether conversations alone can do political work in the world. That is to say, Goldstein's concern over the functionality of the tool underlines an important point. For migrants, a final product could indeed translate to saving lives; but EDT (2010, 7) points out that GPS devices available for purchase in Mexico thanks to transnational corporations such as Walmart "have been utilized for a long time in border crossings. In other words, capitalism long ago accomplished what the atavistic right and neoliberal administrations fear most!" Activists may support TBT's evocation of political urgency, only to be disappointed by the tool's provisionality. For some, the tool is *too much* in existence—it poses a tangible threat. For others such as Goldstein, the tool has not done enough, or anything, as activist art. Yet, Electronic Disturbance Theater's digital activism locates the multi-directional affective flows of political outrage and solidarity born out of heated dialogue and debate as the space of performance.

In undermining the framework of il/legality,¹⁴ TBT challenges both the conservative and liberal political imagination. In the former, TBT heightens the visibility of publics whose inability to accept migrants as people with basic human rights forecloses recognizing their right to not die in the desert. In the latter, the tool critiques the limits of human rights agendas, which turn on a fantasized victim figure in need of saving instead of a dynamic agent whose desires may not center on being folded into the nation-state. As Wendy Hesford (2011) argues, the human rights spectacle often attempts to elicit pity from its publics by erasing difference through universalization, mirroring an image of suffering that one can only identify as such insofar as it throws into relief the goodness and fallibility of the First World subject. The tool's use of poetry troubles this latter perspective in particular. While human rights discourses attempt to fix a stable, universalized image of a victim (often a wide-eyed woman or child) onto local contexts, TBT refuses to map this substitutable figure onto the border. Instead, TBT's inclusion of poetry as functional technology asks us to consider how the obsessive repetition of the victim figure covers over the paradoxes of human rights discourse, which purports to embrace equity and dignity but in fact leaves little room for self-determination, overemphasizing the so-called benevolence of US institutions to determine the futures of its imagined victims.

EDT's functional poetry and non-functional technology set into motion a digital performance of liberal discourses of human rights. In online responses to the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, liberals often assert the discourse of human rights in order to delimit what aid should look like and in whose image. This assertion manifests as concern about the extent to which a potentially life-saving tool could or should simultaneously contain within its function the recitation of multilingual poetry. For example, one comment posted to Evan Goldstein's article (2010) reads: "It seems to me that the only parts of the 'landscape' that people traveling through a desert need to 'encounter' are those that help them not to die. To lecture them about sublimity and American landscape painting during their quest for water—not to mention force-feeding them poetry—borders on the obscene." To deem migrants unfit for cultural production or consumption is not only presumptuous but based on privileged claims to intellectual authority and authorizing presence. In making assumptions about what kinds of provisions sustain the perilous process of desert-crossing, such writers presuppose the centrality of their own subject positions. Locating the performance art squarely on the racialized bodies of migrants romanticizes and objectifies an entire population by coercing them into a staged event. This becomes particularly insidious, as commenters express concern about the extent to which a potentially life-saving tool should contain within its function the recitation of

poetry. Electronic Disturbance Theater stages its utopian poetics as provocation, turning to the mediated spheres where power gets consolidated and (re)produced, mapping the category of political performance onto a constellation of cultural actors whose privilege often remains uninterrogated and invisible.

Act II: The Artistry of Power, the Power of Artistry

Aesthetically and theoretically aligned with Amy Sara Carroll's poetry collection *Secession* (2012), "[Transition \(song of my cells\)](#)" literalizes metaphors of transnational identity on the space of the Mexico/US border via an affective mapping of global politics through sustaining poetry, and a philosophy rooted to the land rather than transcendent of it—extending beyond the limitations of legal rhetoric and reform to what Henry David Thoreau in *On Civil Disobedience* calls a "higher law doctrine" (EDT 2010, 4). Understanding the imbrication of Mexico/US relations and slavery as the historical stage on which transcendentalist politics were thought, Electronic Disturbance Theater reimagines Thoreau's higher law as "transborder justice."¹⁵ In the tradition of civil disobedience, change becomes possible by deliberately breaking the law, not abiding it. Layering spatial and symbolic crossings, "*Transition (song of my cells)*" ultimately calls for an empathic act of imagination: "You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me." Poetically suturing border crossing and relational intimacy, Carroll's poem refuses the colonialist terms of nations dividing land, power, and resources—instead honoring an expansive vision of movement linked to bodies and social contact.

In "*Transition (song of my cells)*," Carroll's politics of citation moves from transcendentalism to US Third World Feminism—examining social relationships to the land on which TBT's intervention is metaphorically staked. Henry David Thoreau's privileged escape to Walden Pond, land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, meets Gloria Anzaldúa's "tradition of migration." The poem also asks us to interrogate the entitlement attending a US transcendentalist desire for returning to a natural world untainted by the corrupting effects of modernity: "Pointedly past Walden-pondering, *el otro lado de flâneur-floundering*." By evoking the expansive I/eye of Whitman (*song of my cells/of myself*) to the strategic essentialisms of Anzaldúa's Aztlán ("The historical? The mythological? Aztlán? It's difficult to follow the soundings of that song"), Carroll's poem maps biological, technological, and utopian spaces onto exclusionary geographies policed by discursive and state regimes. Rooting language of transcendental -isms in the body grounds any notion of ethical engagement in a respect for rather than rejection, minimization, or tokenization of difference, countering empathy's dangerous desire to consume the other's experience in order to better reflect back one's own.¹⁶ EDT presses against the limits of empathy in performance art and poetry by exposing it to the militarized site of the border, where the failure of a provision to perform could mean being out of water, out of time, and out of life.

Alternating between desert survival advice and pointed rejoinders to discourses of "illegality" permeating US policy, Carroll's poems are captured both aurally and visually (Figure 2). One conceptual poem, for example, quotes Luis Alberto Urrea, who invokes and undermines political frameworks with the provocation: "In the desert, we are all illegal aliens" (Urrea 2005, 120). Rather than leveling out the material differences between an undocumented migrant and a US citizen experiencing a vertiginous landscape, however, Carroll's scrambling of the words formally replicates physical barriers to empathic understanding. Perhaps suggesting a border fatality, the ominous singling out of one red letter "g" renders a linguistic absence that dissolves the word on which such death is predicated—"illegal." Replacing nationalist rhetorics of securitizing the border with global social logics that welcome rather than ward off migrants, this poem gestures toward the dislocating effects of entering a US debate centered on the

devaluation of an entire group of people as outside the law and thus undeserving of survival in the desert.

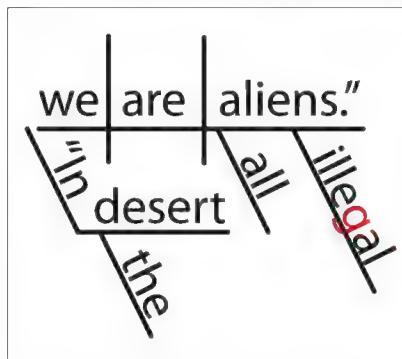


Figure 2. Conceptual poem, following Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, by Amy Sara Carroll. Image courtesy of the artist.

A [Fox News report](#) in April 2011 on the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* comically pits Enrique Morones, Founder and Executive Director of the non-profit organization Border Angels, against Retired Army Colonel Al Rodriguez, who founded the hate group You Don't Speak for Me in 2006. You Don't Speak for Me is a coalition of "concerned Americans of Hispanic/Latino heritage, some first or second generation, others recent legal immigrants, who believe illegal immigration harms America."¹⁷ Morones explains that much like the humanitarian mission of Border Angels, TBT is meant to save lives, not aid and abet migration. Rodriguez, however, argues that the tool actively encourages illegality, insisting that anyone who has condoned illegal immigration should be "thrown in jail." Bolstering Rodriguez's position, the Fox News reporter's obsessive repetition of the discourse of illegality permeates the entire interview—twice in the first fifteen seconds, for example—operating as a covert placeholder for racialization. Rodriguez bespeaks a vested interest in the ongoing production of Americanness as white, and racial difference as "foreign." (The injunction for President Barack Obama to present his birth certificate points to this disturbing social reality. Moneymaking conspiracy theories that routinely question Obama's citizenship, so popular among Republican politicians, celebrity advocates such as Donald Trump, Harvard-educated *New York Times* bestselling author Jerome Corsi, journalists, and voting publics, allow people who do not want to be identified as bigots to hide behind the legal parameters of US citizenship.¹⁸) The discursive divide between legal and illegal, then, tenuously links racialized bodies to overdetermined origins rather than actual social location and citizenship status. In short, the performance of illegality masks over material realities of migration. The artistry of power, or the aesthetic strategies of hegemonic political logics in legal, institutional, and social spaces, attempts to stabilize the constantly shifting terms of legality and citizenship through ongoing *performances of the law* as justifying white supremacist political and social practices.

Anxiously evoking the specter of illegality in a country of millions of undocumented migrants also bespeaks a disavowal of how global shifts in capitalist production create the conditions in which mass movement must be contextualized. Rodriguez wishes to distance himself from Morones through the language of citizenship: "I think this guy that you're talking to—I don't know where he comes from nor where he was born." Rodriguez self-identifies as American, whereas for him Morones—as a Mexican American—is not truly American, because "you don't follow the laws of the United States of America." As this Fox News report exemplifies, US voting publics equate a migration "threat" with

racialized bodies, precisely by making whiteness the precondition for US citizenship. Yet, since whiteness also functions symbolically as a form of social capital, the perpetuation of white supremacy can hide behind the brownness of figures such as Rodriguez. In a so-called post-racial era that wields “colorblind” language to perpetuate institutional and interpersonal racism, the nationalistic language of Americanness polices the boundaries of race without explicitly invoking racialized difference.¹⁹ In other words, xenophobic publics manage a racialized fear of brown skin by excluding it from the very concept of US belonging. What Claire Kim calls the “colorblind talk” of white liberalism obscures the fact of systemic group dominance (2000, 18), and as Hiram Perez writes, “colludes with institutionalized racism in vanishing, hence retrenching, white entitlement. It serves as the magician’s assistant to whiteness’s disappearing act” (2005, 187). Academics, anonymous online commenters, and policymakers collude in this “colorblind” racism by conflating illegality with racialized bodies.

Electronic Disturbance Theater calls attention to these performing publics, exposing their carefully produced aesthetic of Americanness. A digital archive of right-wing extremist reactions to the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, documented in online forums and blogs,²⁰ makes visible the overt xenophobia that the liberal-individualist frame seeks to elide, since it so often advocates a mass colorblindness in order to foreclose conversations about racism’s ongoing violences. Covert and overt white supremacy persists, as with the far-right “race realists,” whose *American Renaissance* journal has not surprisingly expressed outrage at the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* project.²¹ By applying pressure to the pulse of a xenophobic rhetoric that continually attempts to hide its racist cultural logics behind legal frameworks, EDT activates a performance not of the tool itself but of the discourse communities who receive it.

Overtly bigoted threats, which thinly veil white supremacist viewpoints in the official language of anti-immigration law, such as “I favor mining the border area” (qtd. in Goldstein 2010), are hard to miss. However, liberal responses to hate speech typically code racist responses as exceptions to the multicultural world order, rather than symptoms of its structural force. Many commenters react directly to the xenophobic views of other commenters as not only out of line but not with the times. By performatively shaming *individual* racists, the *institutional* perpetuation of white supremacy goes unchecked. One direct reaction to another commenter’s fear of the tool using tax dollars to enable “illegal” immigration uses vitriol to fight xenophobia:

Anything that irritates Glen [sic.] Beck and his army of brain-dead followers is worth funding to the max! But aside from all that, “enabling” people to not die is hardly wasteful. If you’re going to doom people to die in the desert, how is that any different from waiting for them with a sniper’s rifle? But maybe that’s more to your liking? (qtd. in Goldstein, 2010)

Particularly in an academic climate that touts post-identity politics, these comments signal the material force of racism in contemporary cultural production as anything but beyond, or “post-.” And yet, a liberal discourse of shock alleviates commenters from unpacking their complicity in systemic logics that seek to exclude people from entering a country that was once their own, scapegoating Beck’s cult-like following for a systemic problem in which liberals are also complicit. This exceptionalist desire for distance from US colonialism finds an easy outlet when social actors conflate online expressions of desire for justice with active and ongoing steps toward its enactment.

Anything but a post-race space, the Internet bespeaks the violent meeting point of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in a kind of willed blindness or desired sameness that both tout fictions of the post- in order to foreclose conversations about race. Online

networks generate viral processes of communal meaning-making, establishing the comment forum not as a unidirectional project of personal response to a given article but a collaborative space. While websites can be a particularly nasty breeding ground for discursive violence, due to the anonymity of actors, activist-oriented bloggers check the damage of Internet “trolls” for whom online harassment constitutes a destructive form of play. As Lisa Nakamura (2012) writes, “[u]ser-generated blogs that confront racism, sexism, and homophobia work against the impulse to forget or ignore racist ‘trash talk’ by preserving and archiving it using old and new media” (3). When colorblind rhetoric bars conversations about the violent material manifestations of racism, disclosure itself is a generative kind of work.

Taking seriously what Nakamura (2012) describes as media archives of “trash talk,” Electronic Disturbance Theater makes online inundations of recreational race hatred part of the performance, turning enemies into actors in the tool’s drama. The tool’s perceived threat provokes publics into staging their animosity, as EDT members have been targets of hate mail and death threats. In order to provide accountability for hate speech, EDT maintains the practice of publicly posting hate mail they receive online under a tab titled “Flames” on TBT’s homepage.²² The published “Flames” on TBT’s website include names as well as email addresses, following the politics of making visible perpetrators of hate speech—although online personas can be difficult to link to real-world bodies. On March 10, 2010, for example, “gil baco” wrote: “Giving people who cross illegally into OUR country a free electronic PATHWAY to non-detection? YOU SON OF A BITCH. I strongly suggest that you and your piss-ant, gay colleagues in this outrage, pack up you [sic] belongings and families and do your work from the other side of the world.” What is particularly striking about this threat is the sexual metaphors that underline its conception of the outlaw who can only be safely fringe when on the ideologically-demarcated “other side of the world,” which “gil” presumably figures as Mexico. Xenophobia and homophobia work hand-in-hand, as both threaten to deform the safely white, patriotic “American people,” as if Mexico were not part of the Americas but a vast wasteland to which anyone’s “gay colleagues” should be banished.

From EDT’s archive of online bullying emerge patterns that echo the paradoxical coexistence and interdependence of colorblind rhetoric and a xenophobic imaginary that conflates national borders with the limits of racialized and sexualized identities. Xenophobic reactions to immigration debates immediately hold suspect the citizenship of all Latinxs, mirrored in the hate speech directed at EDT members, who were told to leave their teaching posts and go back to Mexico—imagined as the collective repository for badly behaving citizens. Moreover, the inassimilable production of difference read onto the group seems to exacerbate the nativist fear of the tool as threatening US social cohesion. The fear of having TBT operate on the ground, dramatized by the “Flames” archive, reveals something that already exists in the world—thoroughly gendered, racialized, and sexualized panics over permeable national borders.

This jingoistic anxiety often plays out in colorblind language that replaces explicit mentions of race with discourses of cultural and sexual pathology. In other words, the colorblind substitution of overtly racist biological discourses of race with the covertly racist language of cultural pathology relies heavily upon the scapegoating of “non-normative” sexuality and gender expression. For example, Siobhan Somerville (2005) traces the persistence of colorblind language from the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) into present immigration debates, exposing that: “Although the explicit language of race was losing legitimacy in the eye of the law as a means of excluding potential citizens, the language of sexual pathology and pollution became increasingly available for circumscribing the characteristics of the ideal citizen” (87). As Somerville makes clear,

immigration law deploys a thoroughly racialized form of queerness even, *and especially*, when it sees itself as deracinated.

The public performance of xenophobic hate has aesthetic value insofar as its logics gain recognition through repetition of a stylized set of formal motifs, namely the concealment of race hatred through the abjection of racialized queerness. Gender hatred—especially that directed at queer gender expression—becomes the scapegoat for nonetheless thoroughly racialized and sexualized ideas of nationhood itself. As Jessica Chapin (1998) explains, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo establishes the violent oppositions of “capital/labor, mind/body, cleanliness/dirt, white/brown, reason/instinct, First World/Third World, progress/backwardness, order/chaos, closed/open, and male/female” (409). The online flames anxiously rehearse these false binaries at every turn, notably shifting overt racism to misogyny and transphobia. In another message, “Bryan Prince” digitally shouts: “You fucking anti-American CUNT!!!! I hope you die the worse [sic] death possible you horrible, disgraceful BITCH! GET THE FUCK OUT OF THIS COUNTRY YOU WHORE!!!!” Here, the death threats seem entirely unrelated to EDT’s work on the tool as such; instead, Prince’s hatred, conceived in strictly gendered and sexualized terms, turns on his imagination of a non-conforming, impure, hypersexualized female body.

Figuring Mexico/US relations with violent metaphors of penetration at once marks Mexico with the feminine term and the threat of masculine aggression or border transgression metaphorized as sexual violation. These homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic anxieties expressed in sexual terms recast the US as “victim” of unwanted incursions despite its histories of violently seizing Mexican land. US neoliberal policy colludes in global racial capitalism’s ongoing legacies of imperialism, annexation, slavery, and genocide. In these responses, race hatred takes one form as sexual violence, which the digital space of “Flames” captures as part of what Cárdenas (2010b) calls its “long history of radical transparency.” Extremist reactions to TBT, which view it as a concretized event in need of legal policing and control, expose the persistence of overt racism during a supposedly post-racial era in which the election of the nation’s first Black president and the pervasiveness of social media both provide fodder for the myth of a deracinated, borderless world.

Act III: Staging Provisional Utopias

By exposing the artistry of power, Electronic Disturbance Theater’s *Transborder Immigrant Tool* offers a performance mode I call “queer provisionality,” which repositions dominant identity in relationship to performance. Following Cathy Cohen (1997), I understand queerness not in strictly identitarian terms along the lines of gender expression and sexual orientation but as a shared relationship to power that creates alternative possibilities for inhabiting space, recognizing deviance as a socially-regulated category with liberatory potential. By imagining otherwise, queer provisionality generates a performance politics that throws into relief the hegemonic aesthetics of material and discursive boundary-building. Poetic visions of utopia meet dystopian material realities of white supremacy, mass detention and incarceration, border surveillance, and domestic hyperpolicing. Queer provisionality characterizes Electronic Disturbance Theater’s offering of a performance mode that balances, precisely by clashing, utopian visions of justice with the material weight of real and symbolic borders.

Electronic Disturbance Theater builds its performance around the instability of political and institutional actors, fostering public debate. As a communication device, after all, the mobile phone amplifies the voices of transmitter and receiver. Based on the 1960s model of the “happening” pioneered by Allan Kaprow, who famously declared that “[e]ven when things have gone ‘wrong,’ something far more ‘right,’ more revelatory, has many times

emerged" (2003, 86), the productivity of provisionality emerges from Kaprow's revolutionizing of the notion of art as a temporal experience open to failure.²³ Extending this trajectory, J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) suggests that failure's resistance to performing within existing models of success actually carves out a space for imagining, and creatively inhabiting, other ways to be in the world. As Halberstam contends, unmastery—as a manifestation of the queer art of failure—refuses legibility within hegemonic frameworks of desire. Understanding the tool as a specifically performance-based mode of queer failure helps unlock the implications of its provisional technology, shifting the conversation from capitalist functionality and productivity to the political work of utopian poetry.

The tool's illegibility *as a provision* must be read in tandem with its illegibility *as queer*. While it may not seem obvious to link queerness and TBT, doing so extends definitions of political activism to digital and fantasy spaces by reconceptualizing assumptions about the body while never simply romanticizing technology—a central intervention of EDT member Micha Cárdenas's critical writings and performance art. Cárdenas's theory of the "transreal" describes an expansive space between fiction and non-fiction, the virtual and the real. Rather than conceiving of digital and fantasy spaces as escapist, the transreal reflects how fantasies shape everyday life, locating possibilities for self-transformation in shifting sites of identity production—a multi-dimensional becoming linked to the figure of the prototype, which Cárdenas in "Becoming Dragon" (2010) defines as being "between a model and an actual implementation." A prototype, as a tentative sample, actualizes some of its properties in the process of realizing itself, but remains provisional and subject to change. Building on Cárdenas's important theorization of the transreal, queer provisionality turns the notion of identity-as-process toward hegemonic social actors whose politics often masquerade as fixed, inflexible, and timeless. By provoking the aesthetic strategies of dominant ways of understanding racialization, gender, and sexuality, queer provisionality exposes power as contradictory, unstable, and reactionary to shifting economic conditions and social demands.

The utopian vision of the project's poetry puts pressure on teleological models of change. Yet, short- and long-term strategies remain vital in the struggle for justice: utopian visions of social transformation need not be seen as oppositional to present-based mobilization around reform and resource redistribution. The critical resurgence of utopianism in queer theory counters popular logics of anti-relational hopelessness not tenable for communities mobilizing on the ground to end heteropatriarchal white supremacy's machinations, such as mass deportation, detention, and incarceration.²⁴ I thus follow Kristie Soares (2014) in arguing for the necessity of utopian visions and daily acts of resilience in dialectical relation as a framework for any movement toward transformative politics. As she writes, "thinkers who look at only one half of the equation—either only at resistance or only at creation—are putting queer activism in a precarious place: a nonplace" (122). Soares reads José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) alongside his earlier work, *Disidentifications* (1999), which theorizes how social actors recycle oppressive representational frames as modes of empowerment in daily struggle and cultural production. Queer provisionality plays on the double meaning of provisional—as an unfinished draft or something in process pending confirmation, but also as something tangible to aid movement through (un)inhabitable geographies *just in case*. Its existence as a prototype holds in tension the notion of the provision, as a form of material or spiritual sustenance to bring with you on a journey, and provisionality, a way of acting in the world toward visions of justice without fixing boundaries on what that can or should look like in the future.

Queer provisionality is both a political tool and performance method situated between the provision and the provisional, the real and the virtual, hypervisibility and illegibility. The distinctively future-oriented reach of provisionality as a utopian gesture meets the materiality of the provision. In negotiating these spaces Electronic Disturbance Theater imagines what it would look like to live in a world where dignity and humanity get counted within the parameters of immigration and human rights discourse; alternative forms of social life have always existed in the face of power's attempt to selectively define humanity. Queer provisionality pushes the boundary of what an ethics of dissent can delineate, gesturing toward a utopian vision of political reality rooted in self-determination. At the same time, by strategically wielding the language of rights (e.g. "Migration is a Human Right") queer provisionality understands that agency can circulate within oppressive regimes without being ideologically circumscribed by structural limits. While critiquing the capitalist and globalist logics underlying rights-based discourses, the provision- of provisionality holds in tension the need to navigate within power structures as a matter of survival, not false consciousness.

Aware of the "unique structure of state violence and social emancipation" (Reddy 2011, 37), queer provisionality tactically summons the law, as in provisions made to law. However, in presently enacting visions of justice not legible within existing legal and cultural parameters, queer provisionality sees the utopian as a key tool for social change—while remaining attentive to the structurally produced traumas of border violence and policing. The force of Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance lies in its deliberate provocation of the artistry of power, or the aestheticized rehearsal of contradictory political logics as performance. This poetic provocation shifts the terms for understanding performance in relationship to social identities and institutional power; the tool's generative failures expose power's shifting and unstable technologies of coercion and control.

Bridging the significance of both abolitionist artistry and legal reform as part of grassroots movements for social justice, queer provisionality finds spaces to work within the law while challenging its limits. Even though artistic practice sometimes seems extraneous to the daily demands of organizing work, its space to imagine can create material change in the long and ongoing struggle. Both the poetry and the tool itself remain prototypes, models for a more just world around which organizers have been mobilizing for centuries —yet their provisionality manifests real effects. While replacing border violence with border abolition remains an active hope, Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* (2002) reminds us that: "Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation" (198). Poetry alone cannot change the violent fact of the border, but its *space to imagine* exists alongside on-the-ground activism. Volunteers at No More Deaths, for example, often draw pictures on their water bottles because people crossing the border understand that the Border Patrol might poison the water, but would not make art. Refusing to either romanticize or minimize the work poetry does in the world, EDT's generative failures remind us that the site of cultural change can never be limited to the legal sphere, for transformational work must dismantle existing legal frameworks rather than recapitulate them. Social action cannot happen only at the level of the law; it must take hold of the powerful social ideas that shape perception. Queer networks of creative solidarity concretize alternative visions of reality that sustain social justice struggles.

Epilogue: Sustaining Queer Provisions

An abolitionist ethos, as I have argued, need not be pitted against strategic mobilization within the sphere of politics, despite the fact that legal frameworks often authorize the

violent production of disciplined subjects who mirror the hegemonic status quo. Yet, queer theory's anti-disciplinary anarchist refusal of institutional frameworks of legibility and recognition can and does coexist within the very institutions from which most do not have the privilege to claim freedom. Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance mode, what I have termed queer provisionality, reveals the inextricability of practice and theory, and provocatively circles theory back on itself, testing its own limitations against the weight of embodied existence. The *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, in sum, lays bare the possibilities of consciousness-raising art, but also the stakes of theory that stops short of praxis—complicating the opposition between radical paradigm shifts and legal reform.

The *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (proto)typifies queer provisionality's deliberate contradiction as an in/operable tool. Gaining its force from a refusal of binaristic formulations of instrumental/ornamental, rights/utopia, or effective/expressive, the tool's generative failures open up zones of ambiguity at the crossroads of form and technology. While conversations about technology are often mired in functionality and productivity, EDT's technological short-circuits foreground poetry *as the productive technology*. Instead of staging its intervention in hypothetical desert-crossing, the performance makes visible the artistry of power. As a result, the tool challenges immigration and human rights discourses without posing a solution that ventriloquizes the voices of migrant communities.

Capturing the production of bellicose nationalism in an archive of legal charges, FBI investigations, online comment forums, and viral media frenzy, Electronic Disturbance Theater activates as a political space of possibility something new: queer provisionality makes room for abolitionist demands and passionate dialogue in its generative, while dangerous, illegibility within teleological models of art and activism. Instead, it sees digital and imaginative spaces as vital material realities. The poetic texture of the provision cleaved to the staging of public debate locates the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* in multiple spaces of border- and reality-crossing. Utopian visions of global fellowship encounter archives of digitized hate, but EDT holds out hope as/for transformation: the dissolution of il/legality that frames discourses on migration. Ultimately, the media uproar surrounding the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* points to the inextricability of poetry from policy, art from activism.

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Notes

Notes

1. Beck played an excerpt of the video poem of "Transition (song of my cells)," co-designed by poet Amy Sara Carroll with Ricardo Dominguez, Elle Mehrmand, and Micha Cárdenas, the latter of whose voice is featured reciting Carroll's poetry. This video has been featured in various performance venues and is available for viewing on Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/6109723> (accessed 30 October 2014). ↗
2. Developers can download and install Walkingtools software at: <http://www.walkingtools.net/> (accessed 30 October 2014). ↗
3. EDT archived the Beck footage here: <http://www.walkingtools.net/?p=537> (accessed 23 October 2014). ↗
4. See, for example, the artwork designed by Alfredo Burgos, Pablo Alvarado, and other artists in solidarity with the "No Papers, No Fear" Ride for Justice through the South,

beginning in Phoenix, Arizona, and culminating in an appearance at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina in September 2012. For more information on the UndocuBus movement, see: <http://nopapersnofear.org> (accessed 11 October 2014). 

5. For online exhibition information visit: <http://www.lareplay.net/artists/> (accessed 2 July 2014). 
6. As Kaplan (2006) argues, digital technology's data tracking capabilities claim to streamline the convenience and quality of one's consumer choices but instead produce a "militarized subject" of the Geographic Information Systems and Global Positioning Systems central to the military industrial complex. 
7. For a thorough account of the way NAFTA in particular and US economic strategies of neoliberalism and globalism more generally continually exploit Latinx populations on both sides of the border, see Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) and Lázaro Lima (2007). 
8. During interviews and presentations on the tool, Electronic Disturbance Theater addresses the global reach of racial capital by explicitly engaging the long history of Mexico/US relations before neoliberalism's infamous 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, from first colonization contact to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, compromise legislation passed under Reagan, which by design did little to slow crossings into the US but made it illegal to "knowingly" hire undocumented workers. In 1986 Congress also passed the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments, which regulated and defined what constituted a "genuine" marriage in order to make seamless the already inextricable link between cheap migrant labor and the nuclear family model (Luibhéid 2008a, 176). Both measures can be seen as part of the US government's record of exploiting migratory labor, as with the 1942 Bracero Treaty, at the same time as it promotes anti-migration rhetoric. 
9. For a detailed history of the Mexico/US border, see Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). 
10. For a brief genealogy of the long history of Latinx detention under the US detention regime, see David Manuel Hernández (2008). 
11. For more on enhancements in the coercive arm of the state post-9/11 and political spectacles of mass deportation in moments of economic crisis, see Tanya Golash-Boza (2012). 
12. The border remains a site not only of policing and surveillance technologies but, as Eithne Luibhéid (2002) explains, "of serious human rights abuses, including beatings, rapings, and deaths" (xviii). One aid organization, No More Deaths, recently exposed the overt hostility of Border Patrol agents, three of whom were caught on tape destroying water caches set out for crossers as a humanitarian response to the escalating number of deaths catalyzed by stricter border control (Frey 2011). The Border Patrol's own vigilante acts of destruction to potentially life-saving water stations along common migration routes takes border security to its logical conclusion, which extends beyond a legal issue to a human rights one: death. From the denial of medical service and the theft of money and medications, to overt displays of race hatred, sexual assault, torture, and murder, this belligerence reflects larger patterns of abuse, which overtly counter official protocols yet with little consequence for Border Patrol agents. 
13. My evocation of "tactical poetry" is less a spatial distinction Michel de Certeau makes between tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and more a temporal one, as Rita Raley theorizes in *Tactical Media* (2009). As she writes, "tactical media's imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal" (12). Raley defines tactical media as

"performance for which a consumable product is not the primary endgame; it foregrounds the experiential over the physical" (13). [D](#)

14. Foundational queer migration scholarship focuses attention on the active production of a divide between "illegal" unauthorized migrants and "legal" assimilated citizens or victims in need of saving. Luibhéid (2008b) examines the invention of this gap particularly with respect to the movement for same-sex migrant couple rights, looking to the way the category of "illegal" circulates to regulate racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies. [D](#)
15. For more on transborder justice, see Bird (2011). [D](#)
16. Empathy's limits are exposed at the site of the US immigration control apparatus, which differentially polices bodies along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status. [D](#)
17. YouDontSpeakForMe.org is no longer active but its archive can be found here: <http://immigration.procon.org/view.source.php?sourceID=003107> (accessed 31 October 2014). [D](#)
18. See, for example, the New York Times bestselling author and Harvard Ph.D. in political science, Jerome Corsi's *Where's the Birth Certificate?: The Case that Barack Obama is not Eligible to be President* (2011). [D](#)
19. This myth of post-raciality, or the denial of race and racism as significant factors shaping lived realities, is propelled by formal policies and cultural rhetorics of "colorblindness." As Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011, 190) explain, "It has become accepted dogma among whites in the United States that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans." Racism is alive and well, but colorblindness propagates the myth that the Civil Rights movement marked an end to institutional racism, with President Barack Obama's re/election as the ultimate excuse for closing the book on addressing racial injustices. [D](#)
20. One such commenter, "jc100," (qtd. in Goldstein 2010) writes: "Helping people to break immigration laws is INDEED a waste of student dollars on many levels, regardless of the ludicrous assertion of 'performance art.' 'Enabling people not to die'? (!) Get real. We are discussing people who are not citizens of the United States and who enter the country illegally, and entitlement to an array of benefits paid for by legal US citizens." [D](#)
21. See, for instance, "O Tempora, O Mores!" in the overtly white supremacist journal *American Renaissance*, founded and edited by [Jared Taylor](#) (2010). [D](#)
22. While the original Transborder Immigrant Tool Homepage (<http://bang.calit2.net/>) is no longer operative and has since migrated to <http://bang.transreal.org/>, you may consult a web archive here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20120627081843/http://bang.calit2.net/xborder/> (accessed 28 February 2014). All three selected "flames" included in this article are also reproduced in *Sustenance* (EDT 2010). [D](#)
23. Others have since theorized failure as event. On the "political efficacy of the non-event" (2011), see Marcela Fuentes (2008). [D](#)
24. Queer theory's antirelational turn, which understands queerness in individualistic terms as rejecting the promise of futurity offered by the child, the family, and by extension community networks of support and belonging, is exemplified by Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). For a recent revival of the utopian strand, see José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009). [D](#)

**Alison Reed**

Alison Reed recently joined the Department of English at Old Dominion University as Assistant Professor of African American Literature and Studies of Race & Ethnicity. Her work on queer networks of creative solidarity as well as social identities and technologies of power has appeared in several journals including *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Digital Creativity*, *Media-N*, and *Women & Performance*. This article is excerpted from her first book project, "Traumatic Utopias: Staging Power and Justice in Black and Latinx Queer Performance," which owes much to the support of her doctoral committee: Stephanie Batiste, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, J. Jack Halberstam, and George Lipsitz. The author is also grateful for the fellowship of the Antiracism Inc. Working Group convened by Felice Blake and sponsored by the UCSB English Department's American Cultures & Global Contexts Center and the University of California Humanities Research Institute. Finally, the author would like to acknowledge the generative feedback of her colleagues and comrades Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, Marzia Milazzo, and Kristie Soares, as well as the Performance Working Group of the Cultural Studies Association, particularly Stefanie A. Jones and Eero Laine. Likewise, many thanks to Corinne Bancroft, Steven Osuna, and Amanda Phillips for reading earlier drafts.



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Neoliberal Aesthetics: 250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People

Eunsong Kim

ABSTRACT Eunsong Kim challenges existing literature on Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, articulating Sierra's neoliberal aesthetics as part of a process of managing the imagination of finance capitalism. By situating Sierra's performance art as a performance of terror, Kim argues that Sierra does not just collaterally reproduce capitalist power relations, but coldly and calculatedly exploits and violates the bodies of the working poor, particularly people of color, for his own profit and for the viewing pleasure of his wealthy audiences. Kim fiercely critiques the ways Sierra profits from his use of Marxist discourse and appeals to political action. In doing so, Kim challenges scholars and artists to embrace the position of laborers and take up Black Radicalism against artistic instantiations of capitalism.



"The Goddess Durga as Phoolan Devi" Maya Mackrandilal, 2015

Challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal, replicating them is not. Please cease and desist.

—Kara Walker to Clifford Owens regarding "Anthology"

In *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, six men enter the gallery space to be tattooed for 30 dollars each, or their expected daily income as migrant laborers. *250cm* was an enactment by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra that attempted to turn the abjection of economic devastation into a performance for the global north consumer. In this essay I examine the politics, the financial structure, and the rhetoric surrounding Sierra's gallery enactments, to situate a working definition of neoliberal aesthetics. Without the shield of conceptual performance art or exceptionalist applications of critical theory, Sierra's

projects and the responses to them may be viewed merely as examples of the cruelty of wealth, revealing how wealth¹ is the transferred enactment of global brutality. The purpose of this examination is to confront the construction and placement of performative terror, or terror situated as performance and how such enactments, using capital's imagination, define alterity as raw and disposable material. I argue that *250cm* is not a critique against white supremacy or a fantasy about the destruction of capitalism; it is instead the aestheticization of racialized poverty and abjection. Accepting the premise of performance, collaboration or critique within *250cm*'s enactment requires acceptance of a logic where only the artist can give Alterity value—without the artist, Alterity is merely the signifier of damnation, with the artist present, it becomes revolutionary material. The cultural and economic politics embedded in Sierra's work naturalize and aestheticize abjection and insist that the body of The Other is material to be molded by the artist.

Neoliberalism as Jodi Melamed has discussed in *Represent and Destroy*, “[R]emains a form of racial capitalism” (42) that produces and then codifies and commodifies “difference.” Naomi Klein understands neoliberalism as the permanent shift toward normalizing² subcontracting economies. And Roderick Ferguson adds that neoliberalism differentiates, abstracts, and distills so that hegemonic structures may continue to remain fixed; neoliberalism not only identifies the market use of difference (of sex, gender, race, politics), but also manages and organizes difference, finding a placement for it within capital's imagination.³ The gallery space is the economic sphere that facilitates the exchange between social and economic capital. Here, aesthetics become a forceful shield in managing the economic and institutional processes of neoliberal capitalism. It is only in the commercial and finance-driven gallery space that Sierra's projects may persist. In order to interrogate the gallery's aesthetic shield and examine the possibility of decentering his narrative, I reposition Sierra's work as/within timelines of exploitation and global north dominance. I argue that the “exclusion by homage” (Rancière, xxvi) presented in Sierra's gallery performances and photographs is a primary function of neoliberal aesthetics.⁴

Regarding imagination (and by extension, representation), Max Haiven writes that “Neoliberalism is hostile to the radical imagination in unprecedented ways” (104) because “the expansion of the financial imaginary must necessarily come at the expense of the radical imagination” (117). The aesthetic manifestation of neoliberal aesthetics abides by this logic. Because neoliberalism is opposed to radical imagination, neoliberal aestheticians insist that representing the ‘reality’ of neoliberal capitalism must be done by replicating it. If neoliberal capitalism is the permanent condition of the subcontract of some for the ongoing wealth management of others, neoliberal aesthetics is the philosophy, the violent replication of the subcontract, for the exquisite pleasures of those who profit from the subcontract. The philosophical premise is to proudly produce nothing but the old by insisting on the value of financial and economic replication.

The process of this replication is transferred to outsourced and subcontracted laborers. In “Aestheticizing Risk in Wartime” Jane Blocker⁵ examines the celebration of risk within art and art criticism and draws parallels to contemporary US banking and war culture. She adopts the corporate banking term, “risk transfer” to discuss artists who are celebrated for their dangerous/innovative ideas, but are not bodily involved in the making/destruction of their objects, or are not held accountable for any of its damages. This position of authorship she points out, is dependent on celebration to dissociate risk from damage and to profit from the transfer of risk—mimicking our current financial and political systems. I would extend here that the right to risk, or the recognition of risk taking/risk transfer is dependent on what Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* theorizes as

racial capitalism. In Santiago Sierra, the risk lands on the skin of black and brown bodies via the tattoo instrument, and the tattoo line is to symbolize the permanence of subcontractor's poverty. Sierra uses bodies as his material—to realize his artistic vision and for his financial and social gains. He manages the transfer of risk to black and brown bodies but receives the credit and profit as the artist. Whether or not the risk comes at the expense of damage and who it might wound continues to remain irrelevant in the banking world as well as in the arts.

Taking Melamed and Ferguson's articulation of neoliberalism, Klein's analysis of neoliberalism's normalization of the subcontract, Haiven's insight into the quarantined conditions of capital's financial imagination, and Blocker's thesis of how success and creativity are defined as risk transfer in finance and the arts, I argue that neoliberal aesthetics is the commitment to reifying the imagination of financial capitalism by denying all other forms of imagination, via a practice that replicates the structure (violence), through the transfer of risk (the process of subcontracting) as representation—under the structure and guise of aesthetic production. In addition, in neoliberal aesthetics, I argue that the body of the other is represented to make the process of violence visible, but the circulation of this racialized hypervisibility exists to normalize and surveil the violence. The racialized body becomes the 'raw material' that labors for and simultaneously is situated as the site for the artist to work through the violence of neoliberal capitalism. I examine Sierra's methodology as one model of neoliberal aesthetics in order to construct a genealogy intertwining western modernist aesthetics and contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Methodology

My material inspection of the 250cm photographs for sale by the artist and the gallery situate the financial positioning of the piece as one that profits from commodity culture and western narratives of subjecthood even as it proclaims to critique such formations. Before reading what the surface and the image of Sierra's performance has to ideologically and affectively offer, I examine arguments made by contemporary art historians that uphold Sierra's work as instructive and effective projects. I argue that the majority of criticism surrounding Sierra's works have become extensions of his commercial gallery's press statements—the structural shield for this production. Contemporary writings concerning Sierra validate and celebrate his approach to alterity, performance, labor, and the market. The scholars discussed in this article deploy critical theory and Marxist critique to make Sierra's enactments: interesting, radical, exceptional, acceptable. This scholarship serves to uplift and legitimize neoliberal aesthetics, exclusion via homage, alterity as material, and terror situated as performance. I interrogate the field's unaddressed tensions and how it may be fruitful to abandon or boycott⁶ gestures that are operating under the logic and imagination of destructive, neoliberal capitalism.

My model in investigating the ecology of neoliberal aesthetics will be Saidiya Hartman's decree against the ease of circulation of the representation of slavery and suffering. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explains why she has directed her inquiry towards the politics and power of circulation. She writes,

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to

in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. (3)

Hartman states that rather than displaying and replicating the representation of violence, she questions the mode of circulations in place. Hartman's critique⁷ of the circulation of slavery is my model and the basis to my questions concerning performance, representation, circulation. It is important to note however, that Hartman's language is specific to the milieu of chattel slavery. This particularly cannot be transferred or appropriated without enacting a similar violence. In this regard, I wish to use Hartman's articulation concerning the circulation of slavery to be the primary center of not just of my argument, but to state that it is the center of all representation and circulation made possible via slavery. The circulation of the 'ravaged slave body' is not the backdrop but the foreground in which representations of suffering and neoliberal aesthetics continue to flourish.

Hartman cautions against the consumption of black suffering that enables our current circulation practices. In this light, questions raised in Black studies become the most useful methodology to foreground and examine globalized neoliberal aesthetics. The framework is:

1. To measure the position and investigate the politics of representation, of the desire for circulation.
2. To analyze the rhetoric in place for circulation, replication.
3. To problematize in each instance, the dynamics between terror and performance, and the audience that make up this spectrum.
4. To press: For whom are such materials/text useful? Who does it discipline, who does it mimic? Who is its subject? Who is the object?
5. Whenever necessary, to halt its circulation.

This is the framework that will guide me to read the desire for circulation.

Framing *250cm* as terror situated as performance I ask, for whom must poverty and racialized violence be representational? For whom is the circulation made pleasurable?

Bodies as Material

The performances I examine are not in traditional spaces of theater and dance. The bodies I speak of are distilled as racialized subcontractors confined to The Artist's photograph, and realized as such by his gallery enactments. The use of bodies as material has roots in all forms of dance, theater and tableaux vivants, so my presentation of Santiago Sierra is not a case study of the absurd or the new, but a recalcitrant candidate in an exceptionalized space that has further raised questions about aesthetic terror and the function of the author. My inspection of Sierra is not to exceptionalize Sierra's business practice, to suggest he is singular in his approach, but to fatigue all other possible readings and celebrations of his work and in so doing develop a form with which to critique neoliberal aesthetics.

In developing this critique of abstraction/materialization of labor and terror, I would like to be aware but not cautious. The art criticism discussed in this article and surrounding Sierra take great pains to avoid discussing race, ethics, labor, class, and focus solely on the vision and rhetoric of the artist. Though I would not like to participate in further developing what Jacques Rancière calls, "...the great narrative of modern times and...the drama of the universal victim" (50) I try with great care to position myself, Sierra, and the laborers as connected to this project during the reading yet disparate in every way possible otherwise—so that I may locate yet not intrude into spaces of silence and their potential.

*

The Artist/CEO: Committed to Capital's Imagination

Santiago Sierra is a Spanish artist who has been prolifically working since the 1990s. His work for the last two decades consists of subcontracting people to perform his "pointless tasks," his abstract readymades. It is important to note that Sierra has never involved his own body as material or labor and that as a policy, when giving interviews, he keeps his face hidden, rendering his physical presence nearly absent.⁸ A brief and telling list of a decade of his work includes:

Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person, May 1998.

250 Cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People, December 1999.

8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes. August, 1999.

24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Paid Workers, July 1999.

3 People Paid to lay Still Inside 3 Boxes During a Party, November 2000.

Ten People Paid to Masturbate, November, 2000.

160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People, December 2000.

Group of Persons Facing a Wall ("performed" by homeless women in London at the Tate), 2002. *The Penetrated* October, 2008 (Sierra).

Sierra's works are un-ironically titled. The titles to his pieces are the explanations. Sans title perhaps, his pieces could be alluring and perhaps even provocative. Sans title, the viewer might experience his work as performance based, absurdist theater, full of special effects. Sierra's pieces in general deal with the same issues, slightly variegated in their visual presentation. It is almost as if he has taken up Alain Badiou's proposal of failure⁹ and is convinced that repetitions will ultimately create a Best Version, the correct proof.

Many art critics have heralded Santiago Sierra as a Marxist artist involved in institutional critique, antagonizing relational aesthetics. Sierra's own interviews and public letters are laced with critiques of capitalism, exploitation, colonialism and Empire.¹⁰ Sierra's work consists of people subcontracted at a symbolic minimum base pay. In one work, homeless women are subcontracted (paid 18 pounds for the amount they might pay for a place to sleep) to stand facing a wall at the Tate Modern. In another, substance-reliant sex workers are subcontracted (paid with heroin) to be tattooed in a gallery; in yet another unemployed laborers are subcontracted at their rate (30 dollars a day) for their backs to be tattooed. Although they are paid at their base and symbolic value, their labor is shifted to the gallery/museum space, and to Sierra. The price of marginality is the price required to *participate* as material in Sierra's art. He makes it clear that his prices differ; some of his pieces boldly display this disparity, such as that while the migrant laborer will make 30 dollars for the photograph, Sierra the artist will collect 20,000–60,000 euros from their sales. Though the subcontractor's labor and their alterity must be displayed, offered, and reproduced ad nauseam, Sierra's photographs are limited to sets, usually of four or ten.¹¹ Many of them enter the secondary market to fetch even higher fees. His subcontractors are paid as raw material, and deliberately not as artists and performers. Sierra does not shield the fact that only he may be compensated as the artist, or more accurately the CEO,

of his gallery production. In the economic structure of art, Santiago Sierra makes it clear—both as his critique and as the premise of his artistic production—that he is the only one selected to receive the artist commissions and paycheck (Bishop 70). With every new idea and commissioned performance he is able to further establish his brand and career, stabilizing his future commissions and projects. For their minimum necessities (a day's wage, a place to sleep), his subcontractors carry his risk and become rebranded as his art.

Viewing the black and white photograph from *250 Cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, I notice how the tattooed line travels straight¹² but lands on a different place on every body. How fresh the line stands—almost leveled and fake (oh the desired and profitable pranks!). In the documentation some of the men wear caps and almost all of them have belts. They are all facing the wall, backs bare, away from the camera. There is an image of a man being tattooed and the side of his face is lined—so he can either be grinning or grimacing. All the heads appear to be “[B]owed in submission” (Kenning 438), except one, in all the images. In the first image, there is a young man in a cap who looks to his side, almost as if he is checking on the bodies next to him. He could be speaking to the man next to him, as their heads are down but slightly tilted. In the second image the one head not facing down is the young man on the very right. He looks up, almost as if he notices the camera. He is the sixth person in line so there is no one to his right—though he looks. Everybody in the photograph appears to be young, thin, and black and brown.

This tattoo line is 6 backs long. It is not a kilometer not because it would be impossible to find 100,000 more bodies *willing* to be tattooed, but because then it wouldn't be rare—it couldn't be contained as limited editions of four and because then, what we would see is the premise of a union, rather than the “performance” of Sierra's six. In every conceivable angle, *250cm* operates under the gallery culture notion of manufactured scarcity. The performers are few, the scene is rare, the photograph (the photograph!) is editioned.

The subcontractors are without names, without particularity—they are there because the present and future viewers are never supposed to know who they are. They were hired because they were the six that could not find other employment that particular day. They were hired because they were *willing*. They were hired because they had backs, interpreted as smooth and blank by a contemporary artist from the global north. And the tattoo line traced them as if they were his surface. In Sierra's gallery catalogue this point is emphasized. Eckhard Schneider writes, “[F]or the tattoo he does not use some literary or decorative motif but the symbol of modern art, the unrepresentational line” (28). The straight line, more than any other device, exists to signify its connection to the tradition of painting in western modern art. In this composition it should not surprise that many contemporary artists have routinely described these “pieces” as Sierra's “drawings”—as in, the bodies are his canvas, the tattoo line on them his aesthetic creation, his linkage to the tradition of modern aesthetics.

The tattoo line, according to Sierra and his catalogue text, oscillates between the representation of aesthetic production, and the representation of social constraints. Of the line and professing his commitment to replicating and upholding the logic of financial capitalism Sierra comments, “A person without money has no dignity...The tattoo is not the problem....The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work” (Nelson 127). The line serves as its own shield—it is a creation with so many origins—it can never be accountable. The line is created by modern art, the line is created because of social conditions, the line is created inside the gallery, the line exists according to the blueprint of the present. The line was constructed as an act of permanence. The line can be constructed inside the gallery but cannot be removed the same.

The documentation notes that the enactment of the *250cm* line took place in Cuba. Art writer Heidi Kellett insinuates that Sierra “performing” this in communist Cuba is of interest. She argues that it reveals how communist states, though supposedly devoid of capitalism, still produce economic devastation—an ahistorical, imperial reading in need of critical attention. More important than the communist framing, *250cm* circulates outside of its original context; the limited-edition photographs of *250cm* are sold within a capitalist art market. Additionally, Sierra himself declares that in his practice he only uses methodologies from capitalism, which either means that he believes that he is the figure of capitalism wherever he goes, so it matters not that he is in Cuba, Italy, or England—context is irrelevant—or his projects make place, history, irrelevant by violently flattening their particularities for the sake of aesthetic creation and consumption.

Grace Hong’s inspection of US migrant labor and the problem of visibility becomes a useful framework when thinking about the labor and spatial logic of global north gallery systems. Hong and Saskia Sassen have argued that the tenor of post-Ford US labor practices is to hold pockets of the global south within the global north. This positioning and maintenance of the ‘pocket’ – a spatial positioning— of the global south in the global north can be reframed to view *250cm*. The unnamed “unemployed men” enter the gallery space (situated by global north gallery systems) to remain arrested as such. In fact, *250cm* wishes to present that wherever “they” go, the labor logic applied to the economic south must follow. The positionality of our bodies enforce our economic value through space. The distilment of the pockets of the global south, captured as aesthetic objects for the consumption of the global north reveals the artifice of this installment—and reveals its hostility to radical imaginations and the policing function of contemporary, commercial art making.

The *250cm* tattoo line and the neoliberal economic logic of this performance insists that as surface objects the subcontractors are interchangeable. Whether they are in the gallery or “outside” they are migrant, they are laborers. They are fixed yet interchangeable, permanently subcontracted. Sierra hires them to re-represent this reality for the unspecified yet clearly classed gallery viewer. And in the gallery space the visuality of neoliberal aesthetics is treated as the remedy to global injustice. The logic says: *it is because we cannot see* and presents the viewer the opportunity to surveil, commodify, exploit the body and purchase the representation of the other.

Visibility, however, is as fraught as invisibility. Grace Hong has argued that women of color feminist frameworks are “[N]ot suggest[ing] visibility as an easy remedy for the condition of invisibility, but [are] imply[ing] a dialectical relationship between the two. In other words, for women of color feminist practice, visibility is a rupture, an impossible articulation” (xxviii). This is particularly salient in thinking about visibility in *250cm*. In *250cm*, Sierra visually replicates the conditions of economic devastation. Visibility for the subcontracted becomes an “impossible articulation,” each attempt only clarifying the distance between the recognized subject, and his chosen objects. In this vein Hong argues against mediated and immediate visibility as somehow solving the problems of conditioned and practiced invisibility. Hong cites Mitsuye Yamada who argues, “[I]nvisibility is an unnatural disaster,” to extend that, “so too, is visibility unnatural; it is also a kind of violence...visibility is not inclusion, but surveillance” (xxviii). The unnamed bodies in the image of *250cm* amplify the invisible visibility maintained through the surveillance of commodified, gallery representation.

Sierra explains his commitment to this fixity, “I do not use any methods distinct from capitalism, since there is no such alternative methodology and I do not caricature capitalism for I consider it a kind of ‘eternal damnation’ inflicted on humankind...I agree with you when you define them [the bodies he subcontracts] as those ‘who are already

victims" (Matt 315). Sierra's understanding of capitalism is dehistoricizing and defensive. For Sierra, subcontracting, surveillance, policing, exploitation, oppression and exclusion are essential strains of neoliberal capitalism because they are the only methods of art available. Sierra repeats his commitment to uphold neoliberalism's financial imagination, and its current market values, "There is no alternative to this systems, [sic] or way to dodge it, change it, or question it" (Echeverría 103). Sierra insists again and again against anything other than the imagination, procedures and structures of neoliberal capitalism. As a producer of neoliberal aesthetics, he insists that the role of an artist is to uphold and replicate its violence. Capitalism has been eternal—there is no need or reason to remember history otherwise or imagine future impossibilities. A convenient interpretation for a successful, contemporary capitalist.

*

The Ecology of the Market

Andrea Fraser describes the landscape of museum/gallery board members, owners—those with purchasing powers and vested interests. She writes,

We all know that the art field is the site of enormous concentrations of wealth and power. Museums are the wealthiest institutions in the world if we calculate their assets. *Art objects are far and away the most highly valued objects in the world, rendering the art market a kind of economic freak show...* Museums are also directly linked to powerful political interests. And at this point there can be no doubt that the art market and museum building boom of the past decade was fueled by the very same individuals who drove the stock and real estate markets to dizzy heights with unsustainable if not fraudulent financial tactics—tactics that contributed to dramatic increases in social inequality in the past ten years and have now resulted in global economic collapse. *These are our patrons.* [Emphases Mine].

Fraser makes these statements to conclude that institutional critique—the aesthetic form she's most closely associated with and as it currently stands—is not possible. What is critique (and how effective could it be?) if it's what the patron has ordered? What is institutional critique for the patrons of the global economic collapse? Fraser, Chin-Tao Wu and Gregory Sholette have pointed to how fluidity exists between stock portfolios and art portfolios; museums are sites of old, colonial power. Purchasing power readily applies to the arts—as witnessed by China's shove into the top of the art and antiquities market (BBC). These economic concerns should be at the center of our aesthetic discussions. Artists as they are currently professionalized and situated, cannot move away from museums and patrons, and therefore settle into the role of the manager of risk, the CEO.

The relationship between finance and aesthetics, between the finance sector and the aesthetic production is not the product of accidental, unfortunate circumstance—it's a procedural relationship. Linking the affective directly to the financial, Max Haiven suggests it may be more fruitful to configure the most recent financial meltdown not as a catastrophe of events, but a crisis¹³ in the imagination of capital. If we configure finance to be capital's imagination (where it mutates, disseminates, circulates most expediently), then a crisis within finance is the manifestation of a limit—however momentarily—being reached. In an abstract thought experiment, the failure of finance as a Marxist potential is provocative and alluring. Though Haiven notes¹⁴ that such crises/limits have deep

racialized consequences, this note does not configure in the larger construction of his argument. Race however as Melamed and Ferguson have described, is not the minor facet, but foundation and the organizational catalyst in the imagination and function of neoliberal capitalism. For this reason, Haiven's usage of the terms "crisis" and his extension of Marx's interest in what Haiven identifies as imagination are of particular importance, as they simultaneously parallel and critique the function of "terror" and "performance." In Sierra's oeuvre and *250cm* in particular, concrete systems are abstracted and imagined through the exploitation of black and brown bodies, an act that is believed to bare capital's crisis. Sierra's thesis seems to be that the terror of capital might become concretized via the imagery of racialized abjection; but in the representation of this schema, the black and brown bodies must remain silent, turned away, vague.

Currently, gallery circulated art forms do not exist outside of finance. I want to stress here explicitly that Sierra's photographs, according to the rankings of gallery/museum objects are normatively priced. They are not the most valuable objects in the world, they have not yet broken auction records. The current price point of 20-120,000 euros is mid-range and reasonable for the financial, 'liquid modern'¹⁵ class. It is not the price point of the selling photograph that is to cause the viewer shock: the sale price is valued by the artist's successful risk transfer. The value of the enactment is based on the artist having gotten subcontractors to be tattooed for 30 dollars, and having left with documentation to sell. This market is without regulation and dictates that Sierra's prices are free to roam according to the desires of its buyers, seekers, investors, patrons. In fact, the prices move according to the market's interest in representations of (and replications of) neoliberal capitalism. Mirroring the financial sector, deregulation becomes the site of pure freedom and the secondary site of the imagination of capital. And it is at this site—this site of pure unregulated financial freedom—where Sierra actualizes his performances of neoliberal capitalism, replicating the site of terror.

Part of the hope in Sierra's works is that deregulation will lead to its own imaginative crisis. This is the dream that through replication of violence and deregulation the corporation/capital will ultimately crush into itself. This is the hope of those that the margins have yet to crush: the one constructed to clearly exclude those who sit at the center of damage. Additionally *250cm* has only produced more repetitions of the same. In this regards, Sierra's practice in *250cm* is, the void, loyal to reproducing the imagination of capital alone. *250cm* is an enactment that reifies exploitation: but this reification only replicates the violence of racial capitalism, this replication cannot destroy it. What does it mean then, when the limit can be reached, yet nothing but repetitions follow? What does it mean when this replication is the one most desired by galleries, museums and their patrons? A project of aesthetic production that rhetorically espouses an 'alternative,' leftist project while systematically deploying every exploitative tool available —this is the very project and circulation system that as Hartman and Blocker suggested, we must decide to reject, boycott, halt.

In regards to how artists of the 1960s dealt with the market, art historian Jane Blocker posits that post modernism and particularly performance art were mobilized to shift away from the dominating presence of market. She argues that the crisis of the market in art, of art's fixation in the market, pressed the minds of artists and art historians alike. Concerning this anxiety she writes,

Doing performance in the sixties and seventies was one means for artists to liberate themselves from degraded artistic practices and institutions: from the gallery system, from the object, from commodity, from the pursuit of aesthetic purity, from the tired tradition of painting... (14).

This management of the implications, however, was not a radical break. It replicated similar market power dynamics that previous mediums, such as photography and painting, had already embodied. And in extending the presence of the visual art market, Blocker argues that the performers—such as Vito Acconci, Yves Klein, Gary Hill and others—enacted a “feminized position,” and worked through and represented a “hoped-for” (15) body—a normatively-desired body. The desire to move away from the market did not produce a space away from the gendered, sexualized, and bodily constraints of market desires. In this narrative of the history of performance art, Sierra goes against traditional strains of performance by refusing to display his body—what Blocker might identify as a rejection of the feminized position—and by refusing to display the “hoped-for body.” It is in this terrain that commentators and gallerists have lauded Sierra’s gestures: they read Sierra as working against the strictures of performance art, and this opposition, his “against” becomes read as: subversive, marxist.

Sierra’s *250cm* attempts to demonstrate: the body removed from hope is the racialized body, the racialized body is the body filled by abjection and suffering. What does it mean when white male artists enact the body against hope through the conditions of the subcontract in perpetuation for commodity fetishism? The labor of the body removed from hope becomes displaced, transferred, outsourced. Race becomes the material in constructing the contrarian performance. The racialized body is surveilled, excluded, anonymous and at the same time serves as the site of value from which the artist creates, peddles, and profits. And here the fissures of neoliberal aesthetics are found: to be additive via humiliation (especially within the terrains of the market) is the very definition of multiculturalism in service of white supremacy. To be additive means difference will quickly or eventually be commodified and so by the logic of neoliberalism, to be additive is most laudatory.

As Sierra’s body is outside the performance but he profits from the documentation, Sierra’s role in these enactments is as the distributor of risk, the manager of terror. Who is at the receiving end of this management? In regards to this question, Grant Kester, like Hartman, calls for scholars to examine the circulation processes in place. He writes, “[The] writing on Sierra’s work continues to focus on its reception in the gallery by an imaginary viewer, while neglecting entirely the actual forms of reception and performative interaction set in motion during its commercial after-life.” Utilizing an interview of Sierra’s New York based art dealer, Kester argues that performance within self-legitimized “high art” institutions can never be removed from the market. The performance of visual art—in its early construct described by Blocker, or its neoliberal rendition in Sierra’s oeuvre—falls in line with the same market logic of production and circulation.

*

Lessons for whom? Replications made by whom?

The proletarian is someone *who has only one thing to do*—they make the revolution—and who *cannot not do that* because of what he is.
—Jacques Rancière on Marxism

Sierra, abiding by the institutions and structures he supposedly critiques, centers the position of the manager/CEO. The pleasure for the patron and its periphery class stems from the insistence to replicate and represent neoliberal capitalism. The practice of hiring laborers at an impossible minimum has been thoroughly theorized by western political economists. In *Capital, Volume 1*, under “The Working Day,” Karl Marx goes into great detail concerning the exploitations contained in the concept and operation of the working day and wages. He documents how children worked eighteen-hour days and women in sewing shops worked without sleep in order to create dresses for the new capitalists and

their strange affairs. Ten- to twelve-hour days were normal and proletarians were expected to work throughout the night. Individuals who resisted such employment laws were immediately dismissed and replaced with laborers who would voice no complaints (223). Marx argues that time is the material removed from the laborers in a working-day. However, Marx posits that laborers—while alienated from their labor—remain acutely attuned to the processes of labor extraction. It is not the laborer, experienced with these forms, who is unaware of the processes of labor extraction. If Sierra's work attempts to elucidate the material realities of contemporary capitalism, for whom is this process alien? It is not the proletariat that needs to be taught about the oppressive violence of neoliberal capitalism. *250cm* is an image of alterity, for the pleasures of the global north capitalists.

When probed on his practice of labor extraction, especially in terms of the subcontract he offers Sierra has responded,

Paying more than what they expect, or in a way that suits my conscience, is useless...That would suggest that I'm a good guy and that I did my bit towards saving these souls. Ridiculous! If I can find someone prepared to hold up a wall for 65 Euros, *I'd be showing you a true fact*. If I pay double that, I'd be showing my generosity.¹⁶ [Emphasis Mine]

There are many anomalies in this statement. First, it might be true to say that Sierra is upholding the abstraction of labor power or the arbitrary fiction of the wage system within his subcontract, but a true fact? A true fact of what? Secondly, Sierra admits that wage negotiations are affective. Paying “more” than the crass, reduced, barest minimum might be beneficial (and possible) to and for both parties. However, according to Sierra, the subcontract must end via the metaphors of punishment, lived violence and artistic commitments. Sierra's “true fact” is an assertion validating his subcontract, particularly to those vested in purchasing the documentation of his exchanges. Sierra's insertion of “true fact” implies a binary, or an excluded, rejected category. Is the opposition to true facts their fictions? And are the ideological relations of capitalism (meritocracy, the moral righteousness of proletariat-bourgeois relations) not also fiction? Fiction, rather than true fact, is a much better word to describe our wage system, and Sierra's oeuvre. Based on the fiction of wage negotiations and the terms of the subcontract, the wealthy and the global north consumer are provided ways to imagine the end of capitalism—and their central role in this scenario. The enactments of his subcontracts and the rationale for them offer the customer: 1. revolution as fiction 2. the abjection of the present. Both functions actually exist to confirm the power of the artist's subcontracts.

250cm hones in on presenting the commodification of orthodox Marxism, as well as a neoliberal understanding of revolution. Marx describes in “Rent of Land” concerning tenant farmers, “Hence a section of this class, too, is completely ruined. Eventually wages, which have already been reduced to a minimum, must be reduced yet further, to meet the new competition. This then necessarily leads to revolution” (105). While wage negotiations are vital, essential, and ongoing, neoliberal capitalism and the function of the subcontract displays the limits of wage-based revolutions. The narrative of *250cm* is: the only role capitalists (Sierra, art, gallery culture) can play is to reveal/enforce/replicate the bare minimum in order to trigger the revolution. This scenario privileges the bourgeois subject, the exceptional artist, as the instigator of new and better things to come. Additionally, as wages are controlled by multinational corporations that single-handedly keep the high art market sector alive,¹⁷ the formula of baring the subcontract to lead to a revolution is one that is devoted to privileging the wealthy customer. This revolution fantasy focuses on the awareness of the wealthy patron—it prioritizes their consciousness and existence as leaders and liberators.

250cm fixes the representation of economic devastation to circulate amongst only the wealthy. The exploitative taste of upper-class privatizes the representation of global poverty. Sierra emphasizes wage labor, situating it so that the problem with capitalism is the distance between wages, rather than the capitalist structures of subcontracting and racialized economic fixity. This replication insists that the global north can negotiate its way out of this mess—if wages were raised, all would be okay? This wage-based critique is neither the end of white supremacy nor the destruction of capitalism, but is the material for the re-representation, replication of neoliberal capitalism.

Of such contradictory understandings of labor and value, wage and abstraction, Marx articulates, “Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, then think of yourself as non-existence, for you too are surely nature and man (145).” If capital is accumulated abstracted labor, and labor can be accumulated because “...money knows no master” (102), then there should be no differentiation between the proletariat’s abstracted labor, and the capital gains from the capitalist. If the world really only contained abstracted labor then the world would equally belong to no one—injustice is in the way that only some labor has been abstracted through our fictionalization that some things can become property and some labor subcontracted. A more “true fact” than Sierra’s embrace of fictitious capitalism would be a world filled with capital and labor, and no masters.

However, Sierra declares that he is in charge of the negotiations, and therefore of the fictions and ultimately the performances. He fully controls the process of compensation and the spectrum of wage labor. It is because he is bestowed this managerial responsibility that he must enact the full facts of neoliberal capitalism; *250cm* is the commitment to enacting this fictional scheme instead of fictionally altering it. Sierra, the capitalist, the CEO of his artist corporation, will replicate these roles to teach viewers about the horrors of neoliberalism, poverty and marginalization. Neoliberal capitalism must be replicated—outside and inside the gallery space—in order to ‘teach’ and ‘show’ those realities to the wealthy.¹⁸

Before jumping further I would like to retrace the pejorative placement of “generosity” in such “art” practice. Is it truly generosity to “pay more”? How and why does this particular affect and emotion erupt in the site of economic negotiations?¹⁹ I will pair Sierra’s Marxist Public Relations and his concept of wage-labor (generosity) with Marx’s personification of a laborer amidst the process of wage negotiation:

You pay me for one day’s labour-power, whilst you use that of 3 days. That is against our contract and the law of exchanges. I demand, therefore, a working-day of normal length, and *I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place*. You may be a model citizen...but the thing that you represent face to face with me has no heart in its breast. That which seems to throb there is my own heart-beating. I demand the normal working-day because I, like every other seller, demand the value of my commodity. (225) [Emphasis Mine]

Payment for labor power is not an issue of generosity and expectation, but an issue that acknowledges the mode of production. Marx argues that the extraction and exploitation of capitalism resides in the vulnerability of the contract to the affective whims of capitalists. Marx states that it is through making the discourse of payment affective that the value of labor power and value of the work are refused by capitalists; the affective conditions of the contract are fundamentally exploitative and violent. The violence is the ability to privilege one’s affect over the work and life of another, according to state and

institutional guidelines: the contract stipulates that the worker labors for three days, but the capitalist may pay for one. Marxism works to destroy the artifice of this relationship—to halt the continuation of fictitious capital as everlasting and correct.

In addition, Marx argues that money does not represent value. Haiven points out that for Marx, “Money is not a measure of actually existing labor power, but a measure of *anticipated* labor power to yet be mobilized toward the production of commodities” (111). Money symbolizes that which is “already anticipatory and speculative” (111)—negotiations for money are not about the exchange of labor power, but are about the exchange of projected value. Sierra’s lump sums for his subcontracts (30 dollars, 120,000 lire, 18 pounds, 65 euros) assess value by symbolizing desperation.

To insist that wage be affective and the money of some symbolize value is the logic of capitalism and neoliberal capitalism. These are symbolic sums: a night at a hostel, the bare minimum for a day’s work, heroin. They are symbolic, and at the same time are necessities, needed for survival by marginalized and yet dominant communities. Sierra insists that his sum is purposefully base, to reveal how the subcontractors operate as the excesses of capital and outside of the symbolic activity of anticipation as they are unable to demand *money* or are unable to be conceived as *deserving* more. And in this line of reasoning, Sierra’s price points of 20,000-120,000 euros exist because he is not playing within the threshold of speculative economies, but is a manager of them. Sierra’s payment is not a symbolic sum (one mortgage payment, a weekly food stipend, a year’s clothing allowance) as his work is *desired* and *anticipated*. The amount of money he will be paid secures his managerial positioning.

Haiven argues, “[Money] colonizes the future, replacing the limitless potential of social cooperation with the limitless accumulation of capital” (101). Sierra’s usage of money in his project only has one function: to quarantine poverty into the future. Sierra’s understanding of subcontract concludes that the status quo of exploitation must persist as representation. The status quo must be represented ad nauseam as aesthetic object to highlight this claim. For Sierra, commercial art objects and their transactions best reflect the power dynamics of capitalism—even as fiction, they cannot distort, rupture, reverse, splinter, create, process. Sierra responds that he does not believe in change²⁰ or possibility, and that art is a re-presentation of reality, but not the “possibility of change.” One can deduce from this rationale that serious art is the advertisement of the status quo.

Princeton University Art Museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, Kelly Baum, agrees that it is the fixation of the status quo that makes Sierra’s work interesting. Of the *Submission* series displayed at the university, she writes that she thinks of them as a performance of the speech act, articulating, “These subject positions (whether as perpetrator or victims), are not given beforehand, but are constituted in the very act of enunciation.” Baum writes that Sierra’s works are without “punctual resolutions” but filled with “incisive exploration.” Curator Baum is comfortable with and intrigued by Sierra’s conceptualization of bodies as raw material and the speech act’s power to assist in this refashioning of the status quo of exploitation and violence. Baum confirms that Sierra, just like the institutions and structures he supposedly critiques, produces nothing other than exploitation.

250cm works to turn economic desperation and devastation into a performance for the global north consumer. Utilizing the language of wage and choice, it asks subjects of economic devastation to display the depths of their abjection. This is not a performance, it is the dominator’s enactment of pleasure via violence. Violence cannot be performed, it is sanctioned, it is embodied, it is forced and instilled. The title, the scenario, and the replication exist to reinforce for consumers: that we are not the performer, that Sierra is

the political artist, and that neoliberal capitalism can be contained to a photograph, a gallery space. The explicit argument of *250cm* for the viewer is: *you would never stand in this line, you would never be tattooed for 30 dollars, you would never take off your shirt, turn your head away to admit how little power you really have. You are not my commodity*—feel the distance from the poor, and purchase the photograph. *250cm* reasons that the space of official performance is an economic space. It is fraught with the tensions and exploitation of neoliberal capitalism—and refuses to imagine otherwise.

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The Aesthetic Shield: Normalizing Risk Transfer via Marxist Public Relations

Sierra, who doubts that as an artist he has the capacity to transform himself into a threat, has arrived with his NO at an aesthetic of *zero hope*”
—from Santiago Sierra: NO GLOBAL TOUR

God didn't die, he was transformed into money.
—Giorgio Agamben, interview with Peppe Savà

I posit that critical and institutionalized commentary on Sierra's works has served to circulate the processes of risk transfer without examining the desire for its circulation. As a result, the critiques offered by contemporary art historians defend Sierra's profits, serving as a theoretical shield for work such as *250cm* to continue to circulate.

In “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” concerning Sierra's work art historian Claire Bishop has written,

The work of Hirschhorn and Sierra is *better art* not simply for *being better politics*... *Their work* acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art... and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society. The model of subjectivity that underpins *their practice* is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. (79) [Emphases mine]

Here Bishop explicitly reads Sierra's enactments as superior because of its politics. The politics of the pieces, if we are to take Santiago Sierra's rhetoric at face value, is the recapitulation of capitalist methodology as art. As I've explored, however, this practice is one that I've described to be the tenet of neoliberal aesthetics.

Bishop fully credits Sierra as the figure of work. It is his work that emphasizes the limitations of art the name, his work that leads to scrutinize the distance between art and society, and most ironically: his work that elucidates the fictional constructions of universal subjecthood (“constant flux” — does this mean the rich get to play with the poor or that the poor get to trample²¹ the rich?). There is no discussion of how the described art is immaterial and managerial, stated to be reenactments of capitalist structures. In this configuration, Bishop subsumes Sierra's subcontracted bodies as his work—their labor becomes his ingenuity, their alterity his material. As modeled by and folded into Sierra, Bishop cannot credit the subcontracted laborers, normalizing the process of risk transfer and their current labor conditions.

Continuing her discussion of Hirschhorn and Sierra in *October*, Bishop explains,

These artists set up “*relationships*” that *emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation* in their art, but do so *without collapsing these relationships into the work's content*. The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging...An

integral part of this tension is the introduction of *collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds*, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art's self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures. (70) [Emphasis mine]

There is much rhetorical fluidity in this passage, and it is important to configure and connect Bishop's subject/object/verb usage in order to explore the relations and ideas that Bishop is at risk of collapsing. In order to gauge the possibilities and their connections, I will attempt to define Bishop's description of Sierra's *work* and *practice*:

"Relationships"

- = The financial relationship between Sierra and his subcontractors
- = The financial and cultural relationship between Sierra (extensions of his persona) and gallery viewers
- = The financial relationships and cultural capital connections between Sierra and his gallery team, PR
- = The financial relationships between the gallery and its collectors

"Emphasize dialogue and negotiation"

- = Between Sierra and his subcontractors: Sierra claims that he will pay 30 dollars for 6 bare backs. Viewers are not provided with a transcription of the dialogue, the exchange or any notion of a verbal response, we are to assume that since the documentation for the event existed, that Sierra's commandment was executed and the negotiation worked in his favor.
- = Between Sierra and gallery viewers: Sierra remains anonymous, so it's unclear what the dialogue or negotiation between his viewers and his 'work' could be.
- = Between Sierra and his gallery: Sierra proclaims to only use methodologies found in capitalism. His gallery and art historians consistently inform us of how to read the Marxist potential in his work, and of his "better" politics.
- = Between the gallery and collectors: Gallery statements utilize the language provided by art historians to discuss the work with collectors.

"Without collapsing these relationships into the work's content"

- = here Bishop explicitly distances Sierra's 'work' from the transfer of risk, from the subcontracted bodies surveilled to enact them.

Key Phrase

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: Exploitation to create unease rather than belonging? The rich subcontracting the poor as the new standard for art diversity? The dynamics of oppression being a form of collaboration?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: What is the objective here? So that the gallery space might have some 'diversity'?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: How do the poor collaborate with the wealthy, in Marxian terms? What is *collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds*—in Marxian terms?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: It's unclear and at the same time crystallizing why Sierra's subcontractors are consistently called "collaborators" "participants" and "volunteers."²²

Bishop states that, "Sierra pays others to do work for which he gets paid, and in turn he is exploited by galleries, dealers, and collectors" (71). Any reference to exploitation is only mentioned here, and in relation to Sierra's relationship with his galleries and dealers. Bishop acknowledges the "exploitative" dynamic between Sierra and his management team, but insists that his subcontractors are "collaborators." I am interested to know what

and how Sierra's subcontractors may be collaborating for and volunteering in. Are the men in *250cm* collaborators, as their bodies *offer* and *authenticate* the signifier of terror in a documented "performance" about poverty and abjection conceived by a global north subject? Are they collaborators in the sense that neoliberal capitalism has so effectively extracted their power to negotiate their labor, that they are "free" to be objects in the management of base value? Are they collaborators because they have become uniformed as "material"? Are the women in *Group of Persons Facing a Wall* collaborators because they needed a place to sleep? Are these women collaborators because Sierra saw in them the value of replicating and representing the failures of the state, the excesses and triumphs of neoliberal capitalism? Or are they collaborators because their economic and racial positions could be used as raw material by an Artist?

I do not ask such questions to remove agency or subjecthood from Sierra's subcontractors but to suggest that such depictions—in both the performance and the circulation of reproductions—require the subcontractors to be without names, value, agency, or subjecthood. They are required to be without particularity yet racially marked. As illustrated by Grace Hong, and by Gayatri Spivak, rendering visibility can also be an act of surveillance, and the "benevolence" of representation the foundational violence of the colonial imagination.

However, the art criticism around Sierra's work normalizes the process of risk transfer and attempts to textually subsume the violence of neoliberal aesthetics. Artist and writer Coco Fusco's description of Sierra's project is similar to Bishop's. Fusco details Mexico's post NAFTA landscape: in an economy drenched in the corruption of neoliberal capitalism, a culture milieu populated by artists who are "vampires of misery" (64) Fusco elevates the work of Sierra as "stand[ing] out as countervailing forces" (64). From this context she compares his work to SEMEFO (Forensic Medical Service) and the Electronic Disturbance Theater²³—as "offer(ing) key critical visions of the social and political situation of the country [Mexico]" (64). Fusco extends that Sierra "*calls upon the services* of others and makes a public display of their work" (65, emphasis in original). She writes,

His pieces have taken place in alternative spaces, galleries, and museums. He *purposely selects or offers employment* to individuals from the most marginalized sectors of the cities in which he works...The actions Sierra requests others to perform are repetitive, often nonsensical, and even humiliating. (65) [Emphasis mine]

Once again, there is obfuscation between work, labor and exploitation. To *offer employment*—this is quite a euphemism. Sierra's pay system is structured to humiliate only those that accept its terms. Even if one is to account for the notion that all work under management is tedious and humiliating, employment suggests a contractual exchange, with the notion of ongoing terms and agreements recognized both by the employer, the laborer, and state. In this way, Fusco's euphemism "offer employment" is similar to Bishop's usage of "collaborator" which evades the violent conditions of the subcontract: the economic terms most removed from accountability, claims or any considerations for the ongoing life of the laboring body.

Similarly to Bishop, Fusco echoes that, "Sierra seeks to shock, not as a flip gesture but as a form of institutional critique detonated by the breaking social taboos" (66)—a claim that effectively excuses Sierra from ethical responsibility for his business practices. Fusco then goes on to state that while Sierra is white, those who have called him exploitative are usually from Mexico's wealthiest families, implying that his critics have no ethos to critique his work. The juxtaposition between Sierra's whiteness and the wealth of Sierra's

critics suggest that the two forces are mutually exclusive: that Sierra might not belong in the wealth bracket of this “critical” class, or that the critical class is exempt from the privileges of whiteness.

After silencing potential criticism surrounding his work, Fusco repeats that, “Sierra’s work, on the other hand, foregrounds desperation and futility, the gap between rich and poor, the constant humiliation to which the needy are subjected, and the discretionary power of those with even a modicum of wealth” (67). Fusco describes *Persons Remunerated for Cleaning Shoes of Attendees to an Opening Without Their Consent*, a “performance” where an 11-year-old boy who cleaned shoes at the subway was brought into a gallery to perform this task to attending gallery goers, as well as *Santiago Sierra Invites You for a Drink*, where “international art tourists” were invited to sit on wooden benches that functioned as temporary coffins for the bodies of sex workers, who were paid 30 dollars to remain hidden inside of them, and describing *250cm* Fusco then asserts that “[H]aving had the opportunity to speak to the participants, I do not come away with the impression that they see themselves as exploited” (69). Yet the word “participants” is unspecified. In this current construction, participants could either be the subcontracted laborers, the gallery-goers, the gallerists, or Sierra. Fusco’s insertion is a paradox. If the “participants” who are being paid 30 dollars to be tattooed, concealed, humiliated, and the “participants” attending the galleries, parties, and festivities all proclaim not to feel exploited, then for whom does “Sierra bring the power dynamics into focus” (67)? The witnesses of the photographic documentation of the event, the buyers, the audiences we have yet to hear from? If no one feels the weight of exploitation how is “desperation” “foreground[ed]”? Isn’t the function of Sierra’s enactments to replicate humiliation, desperation, and exploitation so that the gallery goer might be faced with Sierra’s understanding of “true facts”? If exploitation is not felt, critiqued, and rectified on site, how else is power transmitted? Fusco defends Sierra’s project as un-exploitative for the participants, and ultimately normalizes the discourse of risk transfer. In the process Fusco deflates her own theory about how Sierra’s works deal with desperation, power dynamics, and institutional critique. In the process of defending Sierra’s critical project (and perhaps his ethics), Fusco ultimately demonstrates that the *dynamics* of power did not play out to those at his site. Such conclusions raise serious questions as to whether these works need to be enacted at all.

By Fusco, Bishop, and Baum, Sierra’s works are labeled as radical explorations of power. His 2012 Lisson gallery retrospective was titled, “Santiago Sierra: Dedicated to the Workers and Unemployed.” Part of the public relations (PR) statement for the retrospective reads, “Eschewing notions of the politically correct, Sierra forces us to question the commodification of life, exposing and challenging the structures of power that operate in society” (Lisson). Such statements—from art historians to gallerist alike—are the general tenor of how his projects circulate.

Santiago Sierra is the cutting edge of contemporary art and institutional critique—this is the press release statement. Sierra’s rhetoric reflects this sentiment. When interviewed about his projects he states,

We First-Worlders and, above all, the world of culture, have no idea how grim and deep this issue [global poverty] is. We usually think it has been settled or mitigated...But all you need to do is take a flight to Manila or Medlin to see the collateral damage of our option. When you migrate the other way around, the feeling of being a dominator—as you put it—never leaves your mind.

Sierra acknowledges his position as the dominator—he makes art from this space. When awarded for these gestures, he is lauded for rejecting them. When Sierra was announced

to receive Spain's highest aesthetic award, the "Spanish National Prize for Visual Arts" in 2010, Sierra promptly released a statement of rejection for the prize. He declared,

I wish to make clear, now, that art has given me freedom, which I am not ready to give up. Consequently, my common sense obliges me to reject this prize. This prize exploits the prestige of its winner for the benefit of the state. A state that is desperate for legitimacy, given its contempt for its mandate to work for the common good no matter which party occupies the office. A state that participates in crazy wars in alliance with a criminal empire. A state that happily gives away public money to the banks. A state committed to dismantling the welfare state for the benefit of a local and international minority. The state is not for all of us. The state is for you and your friends. Therefore, do not count me among them, for I am a serious artist. No, sirs, No²⁴, Global Tour.²⁵ (Futura)

Santiago Sierra
No (Rejected) 2011
B&W photograph, lambda print on dibond, wooden frame and plexiglas
161 x 257 cm (framed)
ed. 3 of 3
540110003-J
EUR 35,000.00

Santiago Sierra
No Global Tour 2011
HD Video, 25 min, Black and white 9m
Running time 25:27
ed. 1 of 4+1 ap
540110008-B-1
EUR 120,000.00

Sierra has stated of the project, "People who are actively fighting against the system need images, and we, artists, must provide them with them. This 'No' is made for all who are fed up with injustice, domination, censorship, and oppression" (Sierra). "No" was a campaign documented via photography and video, and then sold via his gallery representative, Lisson. While his campaign was not able to effectively end capitalism, his rejection of the award and subsequent sale of the documentation will make Sierra a more wealthy individual.

One could say much more about his ethos to demonize the public state while in collaboration with privately operated cultural institutions and its wealthy benefactors. In this statement Sierra implies the function of a serious artist is to be working with private galleries and museums instead of the state. And how will Sierra provide the images we need to fight empire, utilizing only the tools given to him by capitalism? I believe Santiago Sierra stated that he will give us images, replicated with the violence of capitalism, in hopes that capitalism be demolished at some point by such representations: Neoliberal Aesthetics.

This is one among many examples that reveals the layers to neoliberal aesthetics: to insistently reproduce neoliberal capitalism; to replicate the violence of capitalism, particularly through the abjection of its subcontractors with unspecifically racialized bodies in private gallery spaces; to appropriate Marxist and revolutionary rhetoric, in this case in order to normalize the processes of subcontracting and risk transfer; to affectively sell the documentation of neoliberalism to patrons of the global economic collapse; and to successfully define subcontracted human bodies, particularly those most subjected to racial capitalism, as raw material. In order to dismantle "criminal empires (Sierra)" and neoliberal capitalism Sierra re-enacts the terror and violence of neoliberal capitalism, all while making a profit. Sierra's utilizes a model where the abstraction of an idea (the critique of capitalism) becomes materialized not through a reading or investigation of

structural violence, but an enactment of oppression and a lived experience of terror—what many including the artist himself have referred to be performances of “pointless, meaningless unpleasant tasks” (Sierra). This visual representation is the gaze: guiding the customer into an affirmation of the critique of capitalism. His performances—if we must call them such—are spaces where his didactic depictions of neoliberal capitalism can be bought and represented by The Other for the global north consumer.

If Sierra does show us one thing it is that he displays the limits of Marxist rhetoric within gallery spaces and the possibility of Marxist critique to become co-opted by neoliberalism to further justify exploitation.

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The critical focus brought by Kenning, Bishop, Fusco, Baum and others emphasizes that Sierra’s exploitations are valuable because they are interesting and educational: isn’t it so very interesting²⁶ that we can see the other? And that he is teaching and abiding the violence of capitalism? But then why not marvel at other acts that similarly demonstrate the violence of capitalism: the brutality of Wells Fargo’s well documented “ghetto loans” or the ways in which privatized military corporations have yet to answer for their countless murders? The critical arguments made by these writers seem to search and search for the humanity and hope of Santiago Sierra’s oeuvre without ever so much as tending to much less defending the bodies that he displays “without dignity” as nameless, interchangeable, permanent subcontractors. There are no arguments of humanity made for them; theirs is the site of loss to be filled, meaning to be managed.

Additionally, their criticism conveniently forgets how “The Other” is a western creation, specifically, it is the body that could not be managed²⁷ into modernist notions of progress.²⁸ It is the forced, tertiary body. The disappearing body. The body that exists but cannot articulate. Bishop, Fusco and Baum reason that The Other is being represented by Sierra²⁹ so we must observe, and we must do so without interrogation of how the subcontracted performance of The Other is the manufactured surveillance of the pleasures of high, white global north gallery culture. These are the conditions of the legitimized art world—the conditions of the extremely wealthy to maintain neoliberal capitalism as a system without rupture.

Perhaps critics at this current juncture cannot be trusted to read/defend/aid bodies that have been deemed by the field, and by the market, as fictitiously ‘raw’ material. This, however, does not mean that our social accountability for extant production and circulation disappears. A more critical and accountable focus might be: what does the interest in Sierra’s performances tell us about high-brow, gallery and museum culture? How has art continued to remain a site of exception—particularly a site permitted to enact exploitation and violence? What are the fissures between aesthetic, economic and political structures?

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What, then, is the point of replicating otherness/abjection as performance? Why not just pass out copies of *Homo Sacer, Capital* or the insightful text of choice? What is the pleasure of replication? For whom does it exist? A related question asks: what are the stakes of a critical response that says “absolutely not”? Of rejecting works such as *250cm* as useful, novel, or interesting performances? What are the stakes in asking for whom have these performances been meaningful, insightful, or revolutionary? What are the field stakes of calling Sierra’s projects utter, ignorant failures, expressions of white supremacist patriarchal racial capitalism from another exceptional artist working inside

the gallery system? What are the consequences of antagonizing Sierra's claims, his directorship?

In *The One and the Many*, art historian Grant Kester argues that there is a long fetishistic history of instructionally shocking aesthetic representation. Tracing a tradition from 19th Century documentary photographers such as Jacob Riis to Sierra, Grant argues that these artists deploy the old methodology of shock representation—as though it were new—to visualize/materialize the “marginalized” in order to “teach” the middle to upper class (the museum class) a “lesson.” Kester argues that artist such as Sierra believe, “[T]hat [they] can shock (implicitly bourgeois) viewers out of their complacency and into the correct critical consciousness of both the Other’s suffering and their own privilege” (163). The criticism surrounding Sierra’s oeuvre reads like fancy, theoretical footwork that attempts to utilize theory and philosophy to evade questions of power and exploitations for the sake of some anonymous global learning potential. It is the preservation of a narrative of radicality—for the development of art, through the sacrifice of Othered bodies. Perhaps viewers may feel the terror of the capitalism. Or perhaps the photograph will decorate a bathroom, the print out will lay on a coffee table. As Kester points out in “The Device Laid Bare,” art criticism to date has insured that the viewers are just as anonymous as the bodies inside—their point of connection only being their economic standing to purchase the photographs (rather than being inside of them) and to visit the gallery spaces, biennales, so forth.

Is it through the representation of terror and desperation that global north consumers may relish in the comforts of their “options”? The shock of this representation serves as a reminder to remain in the confines of their economic positioning. *250cm* maintains both that our value is immovable, and that it must be maintained. In interrogating artistic exceptionalism, Kester furthers that “Sierra conflates a critique of aesthetic autonomy with a critique of bourgeois complacency...The conflation is further complicated by his tendency to project his own guilt as a ‘white, Caucasian, male’ on to the implied view or audience of his work” (166). The viewer is assumed the ‘white Caucasian male’ subject position—the laborers in Sierra’s projects objects for this gaze. The premise of Sierra’s artwork fixates the white male gaze—an oppressive gaze that needs no further practice or circulation.

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Death of the Author, Rise of the CEO: Race & the Subcontract

We should have the theoretical courage not to identify the violence of liberation with the violence of repression, all subsumed under the general category of dictatorship. Terrible as it is, the Vietnamese peasant who shoots his landlord who has tortured and exploited him for decades is not doing the same thing as the landlord who shoots the rebelling slaves.

—Herbert Marcuse, Letter To Theodore Adorno, 21 July, 1969

In “Art Relations and the Presence of Absence,” Dean Kenning writes of Sierra’s practices that he “does not represent this reality from a distance, but presents it in operation as the participation of the remunerated persons becomes a site-specific index of the existence of poverty and inequality” (438). The notion of site-specific index, is the aestheticization of terror. Who is the site? What creates this index? The scholarly discussions surrounding Sierra are conversations between those who have never been tattooed, touched or used by Sierra. Kenning continues,

Sierra's proposal to line up the gallery staff, bare backed in order of salary, from the director at one end to the cleaners and caterers at the other was rejected by both PS1 and the Kunsthalle Vienna...What this means in effect is that those with power and money are obviously not compelled to move out of their comfort zone and risk potential humiliation. (441)

The conversations begin at a vantage point from above. Where there are bodies below and bodies that can be inspected. The projects that never happened are the most important, as they are direct threats against neoliberal aesthetics. In an interview with Gerald Matt, Sierra discusses elements of the project above and explains: one came into fruition, and one was rejected. At the Project Space of Kunsthalle Vienna,³⁰ he had 30 men arranged via skin color going from lightest to darkest. He then wanted to install the same performance at PS1 in New York City but according to museum staff, but his request was denied. Sierra articulated that he wanted to show the "widespread" acceptance of racialized labor.³¹ According to Sierra, the results with the PS1 museum staff would've been the same as Vienna—highlighting the racialized structures of global capitalism. Race, or more accurately, anonymous black and brown bodies, becomes the shorthand for silence, labor and the subcontract. In this scheme silence is racialized. Material and labor are racialized. The subcontract is racialized. According to Sierra and the current narrative around his work, the subcontractors exist with no particularity other than as the announcement that the global south can be performed and contained to a particular gallery space, high value photograph. Every facet of the scenario is racialized, racialized from its imagination and inception.

Sierra articulates a reading that acknowledges that labor and power are racialized—but this critique takes him to reproduce one version of that scenario. The racialized bodies are there, but, as Sierra so clearly articulates in the failure of the PS1 project, other narratives have no reason to appear. There is not enough money, there is no danger, no force—his subcontract is an uneven incentive and will not be a sufficient mechanism of exchange between dominators. In this dynamic alone we can see that while there are no distinct methods from capitalism, there most definitely are clear distinctions and nuances within capitalism and capitalists. What might the subcontract have to be for the dominator to be defined, identified, staged and exhibited? This is an exchange where Sierra the manager must negotiate with another manager. Concerning this Grace Hong insightfully asks, "And would Sierra put himself in the line somewhere? Where would he end up?"

What kinds of tools from capitalism would be have to use to complete Sierra's PS1 performance? How much would Sierra have to give up, how devastated would his accounts be if he were to pay six prominent museums curators and directors to take off their clothes and line up according to rank to be gawked at? Would payment be enough? Here we can imagine what might it mean to focus the attention, not on the aesthetics of the damage in place, but on the enemy we cannot touch, whose name we know too well. Rather than of the bodies most damaged, might it be more revealing to have vulnerable visualizations of hierarchy, of power, of wealth? The men at the echelon, the men profiting from mass destruction, the graphics of it all: their moisturizer, their medications, their bare backs. Board meeting photographs. Transcriptions of execution plans. The palette that make up their handshakes.

Some contemporary critics have already prepared an answer against visually locating the enemy/the dominator, or imagining otherwise: we are all complicit. In the catalogue for the *Police* exhibition, a show in which Santiago Sierra was prominently included, Oliver Marchart explains,

If one is always operating on the same terrain as the adversary (“the enemy”) then the traditional accusation that one has been “recuperated”, [sic] that it has “sold out!” or been “assimilated!” loses its meaning. It presupposes, in fact, that there can be a clear distinction between the instance of power or the State on one hand and that of the resistance or refusal on the other. (73)

It is fraudulent to insinuate that we are all complicit when the police exists to protect some and slaughter others. The position of the enemy is not obscured for western nation states: as we are perpetually engaged in war. This removed from accountability and defensive rhetoric, while comforting for curators, gallerists, writers, artists, and patrons who congregate within high art’s ecology, completely misses and refuses to comprehend the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, global north dominance and global white supremacy. And to miss the dynamics of oppression—within a gallery show about The Police—is baffling, but not surprising. This is an economic space that profits from locating and normalizing complicity.

In the context of defining the enemy we can see the importance of Sierra’s own “Noes.” According to his own methodology there are no “other ways” than the eternal damnation of capitalism. However, there are those who can utter “No.” Thus far those subjects include: museum curators, and himself. In this sense, he is fully capable of addressing, humiliating, mocking, and subverting the enemy—which for him at one point was the Spanish state. Contrary to Marchart’s claim that we are all complicit and the enemy is obscured, Sierra’s “No” campaign, and his rejection of awards and the museum curator’s rejection of the proposal displays that (unlike Fusco, Bishop, Kenning, Baum, and others) some are able to identify the enemy and address him accordingly. The enemy is unified. They will not reveal their symbolic price. They will not perform, they will say “No.” They are shielded from humiliation. They can say “No” (ironic that the wealthy and powerful are the only articulators of Sierra’s “NO” campaign). All space is theirs, all economic space is theirs for the taking. The performance of wealth is the lived reality of their “No.” For these reasons and others, Sierra makes the critique of capitalism as its advertisement, filled with bodies he has stated he does not need to negotiate with, but under the rhetoric and tutelage of capitalism, can exploit to his will.

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Kenning posits that Sierra is ultimately interested in a “new” kind of aesthetic practice.³² This practice is one where ideas prevail before materials and the artist is analogous to the head of a company rather than a laborer. In contemporary finance, the creation of ideas and the transfer of risk for profit are the most highly prized forms of immaterial labor (Maiello) and must be valued as such—the same logic applies to the arts. Such discussions display the commitment of the arts to capital’s imagination and finance’s logic. In fact the artist, while compensated as such, now exists as the figure of immateriality. Kenning argues for this, describing, “the artist as a present absence rather than an absent presence...” (442). Regardless of the material presence of the artist, his ideas will be manifested. Kenning continues about Sierra’s work:

In displacing the action from the artist’s own body to the bodies of others, Sierra thereby takes part in the more general move away from individual interiority as embodied by the artists—*the authenticity of the artist’s suffering flesh—towards the elimination of the physical presence of the artists who now becomes an absent director or organizer, operating ‘behind the scenes.’* If this ‘death of the author’ takes the shape of a dispersed collection of participants (the audience, the public), an alternative trajectory sees the artists-subject

condense into an image of absence made visible through the physical presence of the artists him or herself. (442) [Emphasis Mine]

To conclude in the final and beautiful death of the author, for the rise of his omnipresence! This is the aestheticization of displacement, the transferred materialization of alterity. Death of the author before the death of copyright and the death of patrons, galleries, agents...death to the only position of accountability that scholarship has been able to locate! Death to complications of positionality and nothing else... This death is a capitalist fallacy grounded in white supremacists denials of property formations.³³ As long as there is an author collecting payments as the author, depositing it into an account labeled with that author's name, building a career under that author's name, why must we continue to pretend there is no author? The "death" of the author towards the rise of the CEO.

*

The Artist and His Object

Rancière's reading of Marx is particularly illuminating and helpful in understanding why Sierra and his writers deploy a Marxism-as-public-relations—theirs is a Marxism that instructs from a particularly exclusive position of power. Jacques Rancière³⁴ argues that there is a historical, philosophical and leftist tradition of requiring silence from the poor. The inspection of a higher truth/art/idea becomes solidified only through the author's objectification of others, be it in the service of a revolution, an artistic shift, or a philosophical undertaking. The subject position and more importantly the ideas (the intellectual, immaterial labor), come only through the work, the lived experience, and the material labor of the other. And as long as this division of power is maintained, analyses of capital and value can be filled with the endless nuances.

Rancière provides many reasons for why Marx required the poor to be distant in order for his writing³⁵ to continue (68). Rancière calls this practice, "[E]xclusion by homage" (xxvi). I will extend this critique through Santiago Sierra's practice of what I call "homage via exclusion." In the case of Sierra, this re-presentation (the re-presentation, the endless replication) is delivered as a reminder that the conditions under which the poor live, though exhibitable, cannot ever be changed. The six men in *250cm* are worthy of homage because they can never be financially included, they cannot be compensation as commercial artists, they cannot conquer their enemy. *250cm* is representation that highlights the tradition and desire to distill the poor, the other, as objects. It encapsulates the dominator's fear of them as anything else but objects.

Rancière argues that in Marx's writing one can witness his dislike for contradictory or categorical shifts. Using a fable of the shoemaker poet that Marx pushed against, Rancière elucidates Marx's need for the proletariat to stay as such. For Marx, participation in aesthetics was the entryway to bourgeois submission, which would follow submission to capitalism—voiding the revolution. The function of the proletariat was to see the virtue of one's chosen labor, and to remain militantly protective of its value. The function of the proletariat was to remain—the function of the philosopher was to behold their placement. This dynamic, Rancière posits, reveals the position and desires of the philosopher. Of this power play he extends,

It does not have written on it that it is the 'sign of the division of labor that marks it as the property of capital' except in the form of hieroglyphics *that cannot be read* by workers who wear on their brows the sign of a people both *chosen and condemned*. (75) [Emphasis Mine]

The philosopher utilizes languages, media, and genres the worker is never meant to have access to. The artist deals in artifacts the worker cannot afford; the worker is purposefully alienated. The processes of such critiques require the existence of an object that can be transformed into a subject if the precise instructions are followed. The transition from object to subject is the condition of being both chosen and condemned, excluded yet represented.

Rancière goes as far as to say that it is through the *Manifesto* that proletarians are granted subjecthood,³⁶ but that such conditions of subject making encompass the power that continues to divide the world. The curse of being 'chosen and condemned' described above echoes Sierra's convenient inscription of capitalism as "eternal damnation." In this cycle Sierra is tasked to be the artist who waits with his objects. He instructs them to perform meaningless tasks again and again, waiting. Rancière argues that such binaries preserve "[T]he distance between revolutionary justice and social health" (xxvii). Sierra's practice reproduces itself artificially, again and again by materializing this distance. The politics of *250cm* maintains this distance under the rhetoric of revolutionary justice—for the consumer of the photograph.

In this formulation of Marx, desire is associated with aesthetics and is categorized as bourgeois placemaking. The laborer must remain the laborer, and must be compensated as such. Their fixated placement, their suffering is the homage—exclusion from the realm of aesthetic desire and subjecthood is the only way to remain pure and uncompromised. In these events, desire becomes the proletariat's suicide and mechanism out of revolutionary purity. The subcontracted proletariat remains pure by remaining as such—this is what Sierra's artist position *bravely* offers their world.

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Though this paper focuses on Sierra's repetitive performances, Sierra's body of work is neither exceptional nor unique. He is one of many commercial artists, such as Vanessa Beecroft, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Alys, that make work by subcontracting human bodies (often bodies of the other) as the material base for abstracting and literalizing their global north aesthetic/political vision. Sierra, however, more so than the others has refined his rhetorical defense for subcontracting and replication.

Rancière writes that authors "can cure the hysterics at the cost of having some of them die" (247). Representation and surveillance are the gestures of sacrifice, but not Sierra's. Perhaps it is not that Sierra does not understand the political significance of their metaphors, it is that he does not accept that this metaphor must include his own in order for it to be his sacrifice. The bodies in *250cm*, invisible yet marked and priced, become the reasons I cannot move beyond them to witness Sierra's vision. If Santiago Sierra chose bodies as material because he felt they were the truest material to work with, he fails because their presence could *never* create an absence. Their surveilled presence becomes the antithesis to aestheticized abstractions.³⁷

After almost two decades of subcontracting pointless tasks, a global NO tour, with the history of similar approaches—it is reasonable to conclude that neoliberal aesthetics cannot shock the viewer into a critique of capitalism or refine understandings of exploitation—at best and most, it accomplishes to keep its own subgenre alive. At this point, perhaps it is time we take Santiago Sierra's insistence that he is not capable of producing anything other than neoliberal capitalism seriously, by rejecting his work, his approach, and all celebrations of neoliberal aesthetics.

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The Black radical tradition cast doubt on the extent to which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life and on its ability to create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in culture. It gave them cause to question the authority of a radical intelligentsia drawn by its own analyses from marginal and ambiguous social strata to construct an adequate manifestation of proletarian power. And it drew them more and more toward the actual discourse of revolutionary masses, the impulse to make history on their own terms....[T]he continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.

—on the Black Radical Tradition, *Black Marxism* Cedric Robinson

This paper concludes where Rancière did not and Sierra could not³⁸ take it—it travels via a route provided by Black Studies,³⁹ a familiar, unfixed space—by ontologically fixating on liberation⁴⁰ as its only possible conclusion.

Sierra's artistic oeuvre situates *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* by him, via the processes of capitalism, which is both normal, eternal and damned. A proper, Marxist critique inspects the mode of production, its fixed and artificial circulation, the damage of its exploitation, and organizes accordingly. Rancière is introduced to critique the power relations of this task. The Black Marxist coda might be to proclaim the ways in which migrant day laborers, homeless women, sex workers—regardless of representation and in spite of it—have and are already altering the dynamics of capital. This is not an excavation project, this is an approach that is ontologically shared but without prescription. An approach committed to studying the dismantling of powers already at play, rather than re-fashioning and commodifying their aesthetic weapons. It refuses the instructions of the *dominator*. It looks for the power of the weak and imagines collective liberation.

The weapon is turned away. The dominator believes this is His order: to have the bodies against the wall. *250cm* is a reminder of what money and power mean to Him. *250cm* is a portrait of how and when he controls their time. This is his one frame. What he was able to capture.

And the lines blocking each side are exits that exist for no one but the bodies inside—

Note:

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Notes

Notes

1. Concerning the necessity of a wealthy patron class as Sierra's audience Grant Kester argues, "Art, for Sierra, functions as a kind of alibi for bourgeois complacency, allowing viewers to experience unearned moments of aesthetic transcendence" (165). [D](#)
2. The normalization and glorification of the subcontract and towards contract-based organizations. See Oliver E. Williamson's "The Theory of the Firm as Governance Structure: From Choice to Contract," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(3), pp. 171-195. Demetri Kantarelis's *Theories of the Firm*, particularly chapter 3. [D](#)
3. Max Haiven's term from, "Finance as Capital's Imagination?: Reimagining Value and Culture in an Age of Fictitious Capital and Crisis." [D](#)
4. Walter Benn Michaels in "Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph" and Joseph Jeon in "Neoliberal Forms: CGI, Algorithm, and Hegemony in Korea's IMF Cinema" situate "neoliberal forms/aesthetics" as forms of refusal, or forms of potential unveiling. While I find their investigations to be rich, my definition of the term takes a different focus. [D](#)
5. I came across Jane Blocker's essay, "The Aesthetization of Risk is Wartime" before reading Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*. But I would like to note that Nelson also used Blocker's critique of risk as a way to discuss and critique Santiago Sierra. [D](#)
6. Blocker wonders what "(A)n artist boycott of risk might look like, and whether our refusal to participate in that game would help productively to change its rules." What might it look like if museums, art historians, artists, economists and so forth, boycotted risk transfers rather than celebrated them? [D](#)
7. Fred Moten has a different take to Hartman's critique, see *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. [D](#)
8. In the Tate Modern Museum video documentation for *Group of Person Facing a Wall*, Sierra articulates that he is against the artist brand/regime and therefore will not reveal his face. As rhetoric devoid of the context of his aesthetic approach to subcontracting, this is an interesting notion. In capitalist economies, value is linked closest to the fiction of the brand, rather than the 'quality' or the 'labor' of the object in question. However, the Santiago Sierra brand is not dependent on his face or body —it is linked to his name and the repetitive enactments of using "Other" people's bodies. Once again tedious contradictions are introduced: is Sierra resisting then, the function of branding in capitalism by hiding his face, though as the essay discusses later, he purports to stay within the confines of capitalist methodologies? It should be noted however that he is not anonymous. He is present at his gallery openings, and other such events. I would add that it is an act of immense cowardice to be the manager of brutality but remain anonymous, ensuring to never be met with

detailed and focused protest himself. For full video see: <https://vimeo.com/35787572>.

9. In *The Communist Hypothesis* Alain Badiou argues for failure to be witnessed as a process towards a directed goal.
10. An excerpt from an interview of Santiago Sierra on his methods, "You are of the opinion that it is wrong to say that people work for money and sell their time and that somebody who says so is a great liar, and this in fact suggests some priggishness in dealing with these issues" (Matt, 152).
11. Currently the 250cm photographs have all been sold. Price and information obtained by Lisson Gallery in 2012 & 2014.
12. Rancière's quib: "I forgot that I had never known how to draw a straight line" (xxvii).
13. Haiven writes, "It is the singular success of capital as a form of social imagination to prevent its beneficiaries from seeing the endemic violence of its economic reali- ties. (sic) Every financial crisis is a crisis of the political imagination when 'the violence of finance' is taken for a periodic abnormality rather than the most blatant of the system's necessary contradictions" (112).
14. Of the consequences of finance Haiven writes, "Money's value is at once absolutely imaginary (it is merely a 'useless' token to which we culturally ascribe value and power) and terrifyingly materially and utterly real in its social effects and its power over social values (its presence and its absence quite literally kill hundreds of millions of people every year from needless disease, malnutrition, and greed-or poverty- provoked violence)." (102). Other than this there are no other references to racial capitalism.
15. I am borrowing Zygmunt Bauman's terminology.
16. Grant Kester also has an incisive reading of this passage. See *The One and the Many*, page 169.
17. A recent example of this is Hyundai Corporation's 11 year sponsorship of Tate's Turbine Hall—the longest corporate sponsorship in museum/gallery history. For a full diagnosis of this contemporary phenomena, see *Privatising Culture*, by Chin-Tao Wu.
18. As if it is not already the lived experience of the subcontracted.
19. For a compelling take on the function of aesthetic realms and structures, see Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012.
20. Sierra affirms his beliefs, "I can't change anything. There is no possibility that we can change any- thing with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don't believe in the possibility of change." *Santiago Sierra: Works 2002-1990* (Birmingham, England: Ikon Gallery, 2002).
21. In arguing for the necessity of failure and repetition, while inspecting the ruins of the movements of 1968, Alain Badiou in *The Communist Hypothesis* poses the following possibilities, "What would a political practice that was not willing to keep everyone in their place look like? A political practice that accepted new trajectories, impossible encounters, and meetings between people who did not usually talk to each other? At that point, we realized without really understanding it, that if a new emancipatory politics was possible, it would turn social classifications upside down. It would not consist in organizing everyone in the places where they were, but in organizing lighting displacements, both material and mental." (60)

22. Art historian Jaleh Mansoor in her lecture "The General Strike" describes subcontractors to be 'paid volunteers.' She does so when describing, *133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde*, 2001, an enactment that bleached 133 persons hair for 120,00 lire (60 dollars) at the Venice Biennale. In this series Sierra specifically subcontracts refugees or immigrants, of African, East European, Asian, Middle Eastern descent. Mansoor calls them "paid volunteers" and that Sierra "collected them" see full lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHjnUivdgzc>.



23. I strongly disagree that EDT parallels the practice of Sierra. First, members of EDT actively work with their target audience, and work to create both tools and weapons. Ricardo Dominguez has outlined that the *The Transborder Immigrant Tool* was distributed freely as cell-phone devices, but also placed online as a downloadable app. Second, the TBT does not require the representation (and thus reproduction) of suffering, abjection or humiliation to "intervene" into empire—in fact, its primary function is to be useful and simultaneously poetically intervene into the lives of those crossing the border. Third, the success of TBT is dependent on its usage; accountability and justice are at the heart of its theater. On the other hand, Sierra's projects, particularly the sold-out *250cm* photographs, exist regardless of their interventions, usefulness, or dedication to accountability. In fact, *250cm*'s existence is dependent on its complete disregard for the material, immaterial, affective labor required for transformative justice and decolonization. Lastly, the bodies and lives of EDT members are linked to their performance in a way Sierra remains exempt. Dominguez in particular has been charged with countless legal suits by the federal and state government for his participation in TBT. Electronic Disturbance Theater confronts empire—while Sierra's enactments humiliate and exploit the same targets as empire. The FBI, NSA, and California state government ban together to protect its rudimentary investment: the border. The consistent heavy-handed defense of Sierra's political and critical project by art historians and artists mimics tactics of the state's attack against EDT: they are similarly protecting their investment, in this case their particular exceptionalized definition of art, artists, and their rights in complete disregard for those most defenseless.

24. "No, Global Tour" was his 2010 installation campaign, where a truck driving the sign "No" stopped at various locations throughout Europe. The "No" is to represent a rejection of the state/capitalism.



25. This part was hyperlinked to his website, www.noglobaltour.com.

26. There could be a longer discussion here as to how class and taste contributes to what is acceptable and desirable in high gallery economies. In *Privatising Culture*, Chin Tao Wu pulls from Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, to display how cultural capital functions as museum culture and how museum culture becomes an "instrument of domination". The shared agreement between gallerists, critics and patrons on Sierra's enactment might be an indicator of their class standing.

27. For full argument concerning the violence of representation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313.



28. This point is argued in depth by Edward Said in *Orientalism* and by Chandra Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes*.



29. This is a crude subpoint but is Sierra a qualified commentator concerning the devastating and violent conditions of structural poverty? Why his desires as a wealthy and successful artist must be taken above his subcontractors has yet to be addressed. [P](#)

30. When asked why he selected Vienna for this project, Sierra responds, "In Vienna, just like in the rest of the European Union, a strange discussion is going on that is all about race but without ever using the term. But they are only getting adjusted to something that is a common practice in places such as New York" (316).
In *Interviews with Gerald Watt*. [P](#)

31. What Denise Ferreira de Silvia has described as "global raciality;" see *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. [P](#)

32. For a provocative examination of new aesthetic forms see Shannon Jackson's *Social Works*. New York: Routledge, 2011. [P](#)

33. Regarding the legalities of property I am looking to Cheryl Harris' seminal work "Whiteness as Property." [P](#)

34. Of Santiago Sierra Rancière has strangely stated, "I don't have a lot of sympathy for Santiago Sierra's actions, but when he pays immigrant workers minimum wage to dig their own graves or to get tattoos that signify their condition, he reminds us at least that the "equivalence" of an hour of work and its effect on the body is not the so-called equivalence of everything that slides across a screen." This statement vastly differs from Rancière's own critique of Marx's fraught position of power as teacher, writer, revolutionary. In *The One and the Many*, Grant Kester has an in-depth critique of Jacques Rancière's approach to contemporary visual arts. While I agree with Kester's assessment of Rancière's non-materialist approach to the field of contemporary art, I find Rancière's political philosophy to differ significantly. [P](#)

35. Rancière writes, "In Manchester the employees of the firm of Ermend and Engels also work so that the partner Engels can use the earnings of capital to keep the scientist Karl Marx from having to take a "job," allowing him rather to devote himself to the work that will bring the proletariat into being as the pure subject of the destruction of capital" (104). [P](#)

36. Rancière states, "...Manifesto gives him existence as a subject" (81). [P](#)

37. In 2011, the young artist Gerry Duran re-configured Sierra's work in a short film titled "Art Talks." Duran, sticking to Sierra's form and methods, subcontracted friends from his community with gummy bears and subcontracted another friend to paint rainbows on their backs. By using friends and those closest to him, Duran critiques Sierra's labor narrative: how Sierra is able to objectify his laborers within his art project and outside of it as raw material, as objects of exploitation. When describing the project Duran writes that he does not understand how Sierra was able to capitulate to his performance at all, as Duran "got this weird heinous feeling inside" participating in his friends being painted for his art—even if they were just painted with rainbows. As Duran describes the relationship between subjects, he empathizes with and relates to those who participate in his filmmaking. For the video see: <https://vimeo.com/26689613#at=2>. [P](#)

38. See, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. [P](#)

39. In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye writes, "Black Studies illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern

selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human. In doing so, black studies pursues a politics of global liberation beyond the genocidal shackles of Man" (4). [D](#)

40. This formulation of Black Studies was articulated during Jared Sexton's talk at the 2014 UC Irvine's APAAC conference in the workshop "Anti-Blackness and Asian Americans." [D](#)

 [Bio](#)

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Other People's Cabins: German Inversions of Onkel Tom's Hütte

Kristin Moriah

ABSTRACT Kristin Moriah's essay is rooted in extensive archival work in the US and Germany, examining the transatlantic circulation of Uncle Tom's Cabin through markets of performance and literature in and between Germany and the United States. The essay follows the performative tropes of Uncle Tom's Cabin from its originary political resonances to the present-day restaurants, train-stops, and housing projects named for the novel. Moriah reveals how the figurations of blackness arising from these texts are foundational to the construction of Germanness and American-German relations in the early 20th century and beyond.

In this essay I consider the amplifications of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work as they progressed through American, African American, German and German American culture because of what those amplifications can tell us about the depth and breadth of the Black Atlantic. This work invites a consideration of the diffusive nature of black performance and diaspora by looking far inland. There are many ways to analyze the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Germany and to trace to its movements back and forth across the Black Atlantic, but I will limit my current discussion to the theatrical and performative aspects of this exchange, performance itself being a notoriously capacious genre. Orienting myself by way of Joseph Roach's work, I argue that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) created a very specific "vortex" of performative behavior that was potentially lucrative and liberating for black performers while also providing a way for pervasive racist iconography to enter German culture.

The novel and its outcroppings were used to define blackness and Germanness while simultaneously aiding the formation of German identity. The relationship between African American performers and the German stage at the turn-of-the-century receives relatively little critical attention today, but Germany was an important stop on the vaudeville circuit for American entertainers. Black performance is important because this relationship teaches us the limitlessness of the black Diaspora and its crucial impact on modernity. Including African American performance in our understanding of early Afro-European studies can provide us with a starting point from which we can theorize the ways in which space and national identity coalesce in performances of race.

Thus, I argue that Transatlantic performances of blackness that developed from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are about the fiction of blackness as it is inscribed on the body, in the text, and in the world. They are about the ways that this fictive blackness gives birth to politicized senses of self as well as novel modes of reading and seeing. This performance of blackness is a convoluted process that brings whiteness into being across nation spaces while defining its subjects. In light of globalization and imperial efforts at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it has become clear that black performance helps "white" people to establish their position in the world as political/politicized bodies and to understand exactly how they are similar to those who look like them, in spite of old animosities and regional anomalies. Thus, the milieu into which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was born and became a

potent racial signifier for distant German readers and viewers resonates strongly here. In this essay, I investigate tropes of black performance which originated with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as they have circulated through Germany.

A wild and unprecedented success, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a broad international reach. Numerous unofficial translations appeared worldwide soon after its publication in 1852 and drew international attention to the American anti-slavery movement. It is hard to overstate the impact of the novel in its time. Clearly, "Stowe had made the slavery issue sell, and it sold on a huge scale not only at home but also abroad" (Meer 5). Stowe's novel also made the slavery issue visible across mediums, including the popular stage. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s "first stage production occurred during its serialization" (Lott 213). In the process, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* promoted much more than anti-slavery politics. Regarding 19th-century American popular culture, theater historian John Frick argues that the Tom show was the "most influential in disseminating racial imperatives and attitudes" (21). The novel's dissemination throughout the English-speaking world has been widely studied. Most notably, Sarah Meer's earlier, influential study, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (2005) takes Tom Mania in Britain as its focus.

The deep impact of Stowe's novel in transatlantic, non-Anglophone contexts is worthy of consideration. And yet, as critics like John Mackay have pointed out, little is known about the responses to variations on Stowe's work across genres and cultures (Mackay 14). Mackay attempts to rectify this oversight in *True Songs of Freedom: Uncle Tom's Cabin in Russian Culture and Society* (2013). Edith Maclean's dissertation "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in Germany," published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1910 as part of their Americana Germanica series, was one of the earliest studies of the transnational impact of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work and remains an important touchstone. In her more recent examination of the reception of American slave narratives in Germany, "Cultural Mobility Between Boston and Berlin: How Germans Have Read and Reread Narratives of American Slavery" (2010), Heike Paul identifies *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a key text in the study of cultural mobility between Germany and the United States (124). Here, I argue that attention to the performative iterations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Germany reveals the long reach of Stowe's novel and its importance to multiple, overlapping discourses about racial identity in a global context. I contend that audience enthusiasm for and reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sets the stage for the performance of race in a way that trained Germans to conceptualize race and circumscribed opportunities for future generations of Black performers.

The deployment of African American signifiers in German contexts and the weight of what Toni Morrison would term "a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (6) in Europe; in other words, to seek out the impact of figurative "blackness" and "whiteness" in transatlantic contexts come to bear powerfully here. This stands in opposition to some contemporary understandings of blackness as a relatively new European phenomenon. While studies like Sander Gilman's *On Blackness Without Blacks* (1982) have historicized the black (and often Muslim) presence of blacks in Germany and Austria before the advent of German colonialism, Northern Europe is still commonly viewed as an intrinsically white space. This belief is embedded in the philosophy of right-wing hate groups like Pegida, as evidenced by the rhetoric that has proliferated during their recent upsurge. In *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (1991), Audre Lorde's former students and colleagues trouble such notions and draw direct connections between Afro-German and African American political movements. I attempt to broaden our understanding of the impact of figurative blackness across American and German

cultures. Speaking of the work of figurative blackness in the area of identity formation in mainstream (white) American literature, Morrison reveals that

through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers people their work with the signs and bodies of this presence – one can see that a real of fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. (7)

How it was crucial first to a sense of Americanness, then German-Americanness and Germanness, is my particular concern. I submit that, in spite of significant geographical and cultural differences, American-styled blackness has played an important role in German culture since the mid-nineteenth century, giving Germans a sense of their place in the new world order and their own understanding of relatively new concepts of whiteness. The functions of this Africanist presence have traveled forth, and doubled back between, Germany and the United States for centuries in a mechanism made possible by, but not limited to, long-standing German American cultural exchanges embedded in German American communities.

The milieu into which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was born and became a potent racial signifier for distant German readers and viewers resonates strongly here. One need not be an enslaver or a direct participant in the slave trade to understand that a slave is a subject drained of agency, an abject assembly of consciousness. And yet, the potential uses of this subject and its agency are enigmatic. I borrow from Fred Moten, among others, when I think about blackness as a constant cultural presence that defies expectations and resists containment. In *In the Break* (2003), Moten gestures towards the polyvalent nature of blackness and its mutually constitutive effects while affirming the sonic qualities of blackness within mainstream culture. For Moten, blackness is the object that possesses. It is the resonant subject-object. Blackness makes and unmakes its subjects and objects through many mechanisms, including performance and cultural consumption. For popular audiences, viewers, and readers in turn-of-the-century Germany, blackness meant much the same thing.

I am particularly concerned with the ways the novel and its outcroppings were used to define blackness and Americanness while simultaneously aiding the formation of German identity. The relationship between African American performers and the German stage at the turn-of-the-century receives relatively little critical attention today, but Germany was an important stop on the vaudeville circuit for American entertainers. Tina Campt's *Other Germans* (2007) is one of the most well-known works in the field of Afro-German studies and one of the most comprehensive. In this text, Campt's primary concern is the question of racial purity as it related to Black Germans during the Nazi era. While performance is not Campt's main interest, one of her subjects, Fasia Jansen, became a singer-activist after the war (163), rallying for the peace, women's and labor movements in Germany and internationally. Notable studies of Black performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008) and Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (2006) are undeniably important because of their painstaking attention to the significance of international Black performance in the modern period, but they do not take Black diasporic performance in Germany as their primary focus. The work of private collector and independent researcher Rainer Lotz does, and it remains the most important intervention in this field. Lotz's *Black People, Entertainers of African descent in Germany, and Europe* (1997) and *Black Europe* (2013) contain compilations of numerous years of archival research on Black performance in Germany and are primary resources in this line of inquiry. In light of this work and my own archival research, I argue that the presence of African American

performers in Europe in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century trained German viewers to conceptualize both blackness and national identity.

Long before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published, many German Americans had opposed slavery. In 1688, Francis Daniel Pastorius initiated the Germantown Quaker "Protest Against Negro Slavery" at a Religious Society of Friends meeting. This marked the first moment in which Quakers would openly denounce slavery and thus the beginning of a central role for Quakers in the antislavery movement. Nearly two centuries later, many German immigrants who came to the United States after the failed German Revolution of 1848 became strident abolitionists and participated in the antislavery movement. In her 1910 study *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Germany*, Grace Edith Maclean suggested that in Germany, the failed 1848 revolution created an atmosphere ripe for Stowe's antislavery work:

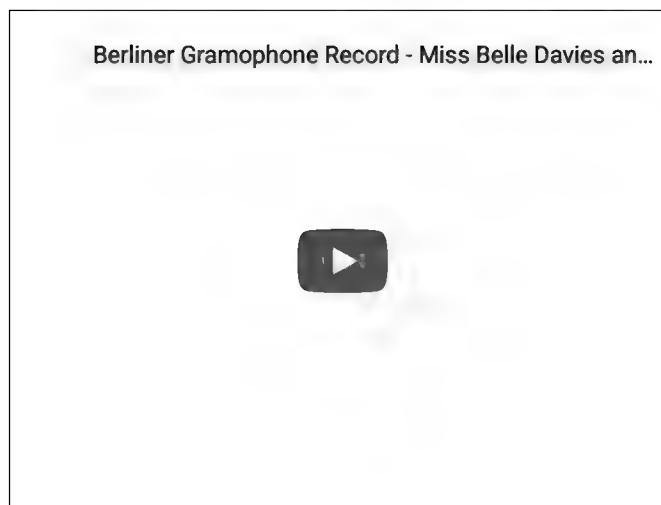
The influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, the father of pessimism, was heavy upon the minds of the people, and with eagerness and curiosity, the book-hungry public sought any disclosure of the shame of social conditions. The newspapers, journals, and books of the day were full of merciless criticism and discontent. It was this soured and despairing public that received *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, and read it with sympathy and enthusiasm, for it reflected the state of mind and conditions of society existent among the readers themselves (22).

Like these American special interest groups, Germans also found ways to appropriate images of black suffering (which fueled the abolitionist movement and decorated the pages of many editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) for their own political purposes. In *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933* (2014), Jill Suzanne Smith briefly gestures towards the ways the American abolition movement provided a model for the German feminist movement against anti-prostitution legislation in the Wilhelmine era. This German identification with downtrodden, enslaved African Americans was not unproblematic. Maclean and Smith's work points to a cultural predisposition on the part of the Germans that contemporary feminist critics might link to larger debates on the nature of sympathy in literature and a "subversive-colonization" paradigm in which the "subversion" side holds up sympathy's ability to create solidarity with the disenfranchised, while the 'colonization' angle emphasizes its disciplinary function and its tendency to elide agency and (especially racial) difference and to colonize the subjectivity of its objects" (Crosby 379). The subversive-colonization paradigm does not necessarily result in social recognition or equality; such impulses contributed to the colonial climate that emerged from the racist politics of the Atlantic slave trade.

The tensions in this paradigm are evident in the uneven fruits of Harriet Beecher Stowe's labor. Numerous translations, adaptations and children's versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared on the German market almost immediately after the book's initial publication. Unauthorized German translations of Stowe's work were also published in the United States. Harriet Beecher Stowe herself traveled to Germany in 1856, visiting several towns and cities including Berlin, Heidelberg, Düsseldorf, and Leipzig over the course of three weeks (Maclean 17). In Germany she was known as "die berühmte Verfasserin von Onkel Tom's Hütte," (the famous author of Uncle Tom's Hut), or "die Humanistin" (the humanist), and her book was called the "Evangelium der Negersklaven" (Gospel of the Negro Slave). The craze for Onkel Tom's Hütte created a wider demand for "Sklavengeschichten," slave stories, and German-authored novels with similar themes began to appear. A reviewer from the Freiburger Zeitung claimed that "because of the books uniqueness and "its political and social 'tendenz', it was bound to be circulated and read, and it left behind a picture of the black race, which could not be banished. The negro characters are considered by all well drawn, and to form a 'gallery of black faces'" (Maclean 41). And yet,

in this kind of gallery, black lives are objects to be both consumed and traded upon, lacking the depth that would allow viewers a more nuanced recognition of the politics that informed black struggles for freedom in the 19th century and their expansive political stakes.

As the Freiburger Zeitung reviewer illustrates, the “picture of the black race” presented by Stowe left a lasting impression on the German public. These pictures were both figurative and literal, and the “gallery of black faces” based on Stowe’s novel soon included blackface minstrels. In the midst of this vortex of Circum-Atlantic cultural exchange, it becomes difficult to trace the beginnings and end of the use of the blackface minstrelsy of which Tom Shows have become so closely identified with. For example, during the nineteenth century, a German dramatization of *Onkel Tom’s Hütte* (1853) by Therese von Megerle was presented in German American theaters in Pennsylvania. As the various Tom Shows that were developed from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made their back and forth between the United States and Germany, so did a troubling appetite for African American performers, negersongs and negertanz. These initial tendencies towards blackface opened the doors to performances that held greater potential for subversion. Riffing off of Miss Ophelia and Topsy, “Belle Davis and her Pickaninnies” were immensely popular in Germany; one of the only surviving recordings of Davis was made in Berlin. Late nineteenth-century performing acts like the “Georgia Piccaninnies of America [sic]” were relatively unknown in the United States, but they were able to make their living almost entirely in Europe, and well past their youth. There would be many other such groups. Dancer Ida Forsyne began her career in pickaninny shows in the United States, but she made a name for herself in Europe and promoted herself as “Topsy” across the continent and in several large Das Programm advertisements. Jayna Brown, noting the way “stories proliferating out of plantation lore melted together European colonial fictions with U.S. antebellum plantation nostalgia” (58) identifies the Topsy figure as one who resists containment or absorption in Western practices of discipline and time. Thus, performances of childishness and servitude that were a feature of most Topsy and pickaninny acts, as demonstrated by women like Davis and Forsyne, and their troupes, represented moments at which performances of blackness were most resistant to cooptation or easy assimilation into either German or American political agendas.



Video 1: Recording of Belle Davis, “Just Because She Made Dem Goo Goo Eyes”

Onkel Tom’s Hütte’s role as a vehicle for the visualization of monolithic blackness funnels into questions about the novel’s (and its attendant cultural productions) relationship to German colonization. The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 saw the gathering of powerful

European nations to divide the African continent and establish complete colonial dominance over its peoples. Before this meeting, Germany's influence over the continent had been minimal in comparison to that of major slave-trading nations like England, France, Spain, and Portugal. After the Berlin Conference, Germany would emerge as a new colonial force in Africa and begin to engage with racial otherness in ways that were particular to the dawn of the modern era. Colonialization resulted in new conflations between blackness and servitude throughout the Western visual field. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served as a cultural script for Germany and other European countries with imperial agendas. In *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (2011) David Ciarlo delineates the connections between German imperialism, racist tropes in advertising and visual culture during the late nineteenth century, and the impact of German-American cultural exchanges on these fields. Among other things, Ciarlo argues that Tom shows "familiarized European and German audiences with the racial stereotypes that were common in the slaveholding and postslavery segregated United States" (219), came to represent a certain Americanness in terms of visual aesthetics, and that they resonated "with both pro-and Anti-American sentiments" (219). Jayna Brown suggests that Topsy and other pickaninnies represented "figures of English and European colonial subjecthood" (65). In other words, "the picaninny was a lasting figure for the primitive; the project of civilizing Topsy was a metaphor for colonial missionary programs and their agendas" (65).

Traced from the mid-nineteenth century, changes in illustrated versions of *Onkel Tom's Hütte* reflect Germany's increasing colonial ambitions through the use of lush tropical iconography and increasingly exotic landscapes. The transformations I am referring to here are best exemplified in *Onkel Tom's Hütte, Oder Des Leben der Sklaven in Amerika, nach Harriet Beecher Stowe, fur die Jugend*, as translated by Leopold Streich in 1863. Printed on a lush green cloth, the cover for Streich's *Onkel Tom's Hütte* evokes a jungle setting. The title is written in a bamboo-style script and framed by palm trees. Monkeys, snakes, tropical birds, and alligators play in their branches. Tom and his family are framed by vines above the title. To a lesser extent, undated editions of Bruno Hoffman and Carl Koch's *Onkel Tom's Hütte: Erzählung Aus Dem Fernen Westen* (1930) also feature lush tropical settings on the cover and exemplify the conflation between black labor and colonialism, although in this particular instance, the unsettled territory is also imagined as the Western United States. In early editions of *Onkel Tom's Hütte*, illustrations were often copied directly from American or English editions of the novel, or hewed closely to the originals. These early illustrations depicted popular episodes in the narrative, like Eliza's flight over the Ohio River or Eliza's son dancing for Mr. Haley. As Germany became more involved with African cotton production, *Onkel Tom's Hütte* illustrations began to focus less and less on popular episodes in the text and more on incidents of black manual labor, especially of blacks and cotton. These illustrations functioned as visual justifications for colonialism in the same way Tom Shows could also support proslavery sentiments. This conflation of enslaved African Americans with African laborers also revealed an increased interest in visual tropes of race. While the popularity of minstrel shows in Germany peaked in the 1880s (Ciarlo 218) German performing arts journals and trade periodicals like *Das Programm* and *Der Artist* reveal a surge in racialized performance in the 1890s, just a few years after Germany's first colonial engagement with Africa. Black stage performance in Germany would flourish in this way until the end of the Weimar era.

It is perhaps fitting to briefly gloss the actual space of *Onkel Tom's Hütte*, which resonated deeply in Germany as phenomenological ideal in ways that are difficult to imagine on American soil. In Berlin, the "Idyllische Wald-Restaurant" named for *Onkel Tom's Hütte* was a popular entertainment site. In the 1920s, the Zehlendorf neighborhood in which the restaurant was located would become home to the *Onkel Tom's Hütte* social housing

development designed by renowned modern architect Bruno Taut. Bruno Taut's Waldseidlung is one of the most important examples of modernist public housing. Constructed between 1926 and 1931, the early development "housed some five hundred units in three types, set in beautiful parkland on the edge of the Grunewald, but with a direct railway link to the city" (Boyd and Whyte 465). Its forest setting was pragmatic in keeping both with "the social democratic ambition to create housing that was generously provided with light, air, and access to green space" (Boyd and Whyte 465) and the need to house working-class people in inexpensive areas of the city. Providing adequate housing for "German" people was a key element of German nationalism in the modern era. The newly formed Weimar Republic took the creation of public housing as one of its key elements. While the increasing urbanization that fostered the birth of the Metropolis began in the Wilhelmine period, it was only in 1918, under the Weimar government, that a concrete public housing development policy was enacted. Barbara Miller's *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945* (1985), remains a useful guide to how architecture was used to define the new values of the Weimar Republic. Weimar housing policies, a central achievement of the newly formed republic, were unique in the world at the time. Later, the National Social Party would explicitly use public housing as a keystone of its definition of the volk and the cityscape as a reflection of National Socialist Weltanschauung. However, while the National Socialists party also claimed that the creation of public housing was important to them, the construction of public housing was cut under their regime, and modernist architecture was thoroughly rebuked.

While playing out and translating the lives and living spaces of enslaved people's, guests and residents of the Onkel Tom's Hütte housing project both explicitly and implicitly shaped their own national identity. In the words of Taut,

Pride of place does not go to any single attribute of the home, but to the combination of all its attributes. What has to be achieved is an organism that is the perfectly fitting shell of contemporary human beings (defined by their fruitful attributes), and that is in the sense akin to clothing – an extension of clothing, so to speak. (*The New Home: Woman as Creative Spirit* 467)

Or perhaps skin, specifically a skin or shell that reflect commonalities across international and racial boundaries. Slipping in and out of modernist housing complexes, German laborers participated in a discourse about race, labor, and politics. Andrew Zimmerman reminds us of the ways German social scientists perceived similarities between the situation in the American South and that in the Prussian East (70), thus also recognizing the similarities between the German proletariat and Blacks in America.

It is not insignificant then that Taut's Waldseidlung was nestled in Zehlendorf, a neighborhood named for homes deliberately aligned with black primitivism and white colonialism in the European imagination. In some ways, the very existence of the complex named after a novel so fundamental to the abolition movement brings to mind the radical politics of the 1848'ers and their understanding of the connection between European serfs and enslaved black Americans. Taut's Waldseidlung can be understood as a tribute to interracial collaboration and political activism. Indeed, Esra Akcan explains that, "Taut was one of the few architects of the modern period who were consciously engaged in understanding these tensions and potentials inherent in cross-cultural translations" (Akcan 9). Bruno Taut's architectural writings reveal a preoccupation with transnational principles of architecture that was rooted in his interest in non-European design and his belief in its superiority. The challenge that Taut's work posed to colonial authority is perhaps best illustrated by his forced exile during the rule of the National Socialist party. The backlash against a purely functional conception of mass housing, which was already gathering pace by 1930, found a natural support after 1933 in National Socialist ideology

that damned modernist architecture and urbanism as Bolshevik, and favored instead housing that reflected the simple life on German soil, drawing heavily for its symbolism on vernacular models. In Berlin, this urge found quintessential expression in the SS-Kameradschaftsseidlung, built in Zehlendorf in 1937-39. Sited, with a certain irony, almost directly across the road from Taut's Onkel Tom's Hütte development, this housing for the SS came straight from the pages of the Brother's Grimm, with high-pitched roofs, red tiles, and rustic shutters.

Ironically, the neighborhood's Kameradschaftsseidlung more closely represent a literal interpretation of the slave cabins the neighborhood is named after. For Taut and his contemporaries, the Onkel Tom's Hütte complex and the novel that inspired it represented a complex negotiation of European ideals and rough translations of African American culture that did not necessarily bolster white supremacy.

This understanding of how Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* impacted Germany's largest city draws on performance studies and the ways in which this discipline allows us to consider how performances of identity and citizenship occur within the urban landscape. In her introduction to *Performing the City*, the 2014 TDR special issue on the relationship between cities and performance, Carol Martin claims that

Cities are live performances. How people behave in the streets, in the parks, in the outdoor markets, in the stadiums, inside buildings—the halls of learning, museums, government offices, courtrooms, theatres, apartments, restaurants, cafes, and hotels—and riding public and private transportation gives cities their unique character, ambience, and tone. (Martin 11)

Martin's treatise also hints at the importance of architecture and urban planning to embodied performances of identity such as, in the case of the Uncle Tom's Hütte restaurant and resort, colonial identity. For if "geographic place and aesthetic experience are inevitably entangled in ways that deserve careful consideration," (Martin 15) then "the physical spaces and structures of urban environments result from a performance of ideas that signify organizational and hierarchical problems and possibilities including those of political, religious, and cultural systems" (Martin 12). In the same issue of TDR, Imanuel Schipper reaffirms the importance of the work of French theoretician Henri Lefebvre (1974) and his conceptualization of space,

with the observation that spaces do not exist per se, but rather arise as a social product, as relations between the perceptions and actions of people and the built environment. In other words, a space (including urban space) is a co-production of given circumstances and the experiences and actions of human beings. Secondly, as urban space depends on people, it always has the potential to be reshaped, transformed, and used differently. (Schipper 22)

Through Henri Lefebvre's work and in keeping with recent work on performance in the urban landscape, we can begin to understand the ways in which the physical structure of Uncle Tom's Cabin, understood as a space of white supremacy and domination, was perfectly at home in the German metropolis. As such, Heike Paul has outlined the continuing impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* across the German political and cultural landscape, including its controversial use as a racial slur in coverage of Barack Obama's election in the German newspaper *Die Tagezeitung*. I argue that performances of blackness in the German metropolis remain tied to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that those performances had a profound impact on the formation of racial identity for white Germans.

I have outlined some of the foundations of black performance in Germany at the beginning of the modern era. It is my contention that early engagements with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set the stage for later forms of black performance. The novel spawned a set of visual tropes that took root on the German popular stage even as they contributed to American blackface minstrelsy. Performances of blackness on the popular stage in both Germany and the United States evolved from a shared set of racist visual tropes. These visual tropes, while ostensibly creating definitive limits for the personhood of the black other, also created a means by which whites on both sides of the Atlantic could come to understand themselves and their own relationship to nationhood. This phenomenon became evident in Berlin's urban landscape, starting at the turn of the century. Thus, iterations of Uncle Tom's cabin as a physical site in the city of Berlin have much to tell us about race, space, and performances of nationhood.

The current space of Onkel Tom's Hütte poses a challenge for those who are conscious of the numerous ways Harriet Beecher Stowe's text has been deployed, and of its afterlives. Ex-pat American artist Paula Ross has written about her own confounding around the stop, in light of its cultural baggage, asking herself, during her initial encounter, "if this was some kind of German joke? What on earth would possess the transportation system to name a station after a character in an American text that carried so much baggage?" But, to put it plainly, the elegance of Taut's project, these "projects," are so much more beautiful than any North American public housing development that currently exists, or that possibly ever will be, that they defy even these initial reactions. These cottage/cabin/apartment buildings nestled between soaring pines miles from the bustling center of Berlin were built out of necessity and a sense of mutual obligation, an obligation to a people quite like oneself with similar claims to land and space. Public housing by the volk for the volk, dignified living in a way that continues to be denied to so many black folk on American soil. In this housing project I read a recognition of mutual humanity through the experience and being of the other that does not always translate across bodies, space and time.¹



Video 2: Clip from 1960s German film adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, dubbed in Spanish.

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Notes

1. Editorial note: The article has been edited by the author.

 [Bio](#)

Kristin Moriah



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Issue 4 (2015) – Performance: Circulations and Relations

Vibration: Objects Performing Violence, Queerness, and Transcendence / Dick Hungry Whore

Sheila Malone

ABSTRACT Sheila Malone's work is both digital art piece and critical essay, which explores the queerness and the vibrating machine in light of both recent scholarship on objects and materiality and the author's own work as a performance artist. Malone's art cuts across and questions the divides between highbrow and lowbrow, permanence and ephemerality, the G-rated and the X-rated. The digital installation and accompanying essay understand the space of inbetweenness as a potential site for queer interventions into existing material orders.

[Editor's note: *Gallo Vulgo Esurio Meretrix: or Dick Hungry Whore* can be accessed at www.sheilamalone.com/DHW]

This essay on vibration and vibratory objects works through a phenomenological framework to re-imagine energetic movements. This subsequently informs new methods and modes of orientation toward objects, disrupting previously understood vibrational patterns of lived or sensed experiences. How vibratory objects impact the body and how the body senses these vibratory objects is perhaps central to the idea that vibration is an exchange of power. My aim is to situate the word vibration into a discourse about pleasure, queerness, and the relationship the body has toward objects—toward vibrating machines. This essay is organized into three parts: the phenomenology of the objects of tattooing, the vibration of tattooing, and the queering of the objects that are tattooed.

I arrived at phenomenology through Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Ahmed's polemical tethering to and toward objects of the Other breaks the patrilineal trajectory of phenomenological discourse. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that our perception of objects around us is not static or fixed as it is a field constantly changing from within the body and outside in the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (Merleau-Ponty xi). Ahmed reregisters the voice of the subaltern through her "queering" approach to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Ahmed writes, "A queer phenomenology might turn to phenomenology by asking not only about the concept of orientation *in* phenomenology, but also about the orientation *of* phenomenology" (Ahmed 3). Ahmed proceeds to question not just how we arrived at the writing table, but what we turn our back to when we arrive. Ahmed argues, "if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness" (38). In other words, Ahmed argues for an attention to the "background" of the object we approach or are oriented to through other bodily perception. Ahmed draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's transcendental phenomenology in order to register a critique of normative orientations. By using

Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed claims, "If Merleau-Ponty accounts for how things get straightened up, then he also accounts for how things become queer, or how 'the straight' might even depend on 'queer slants'" (106). From Ahmed's attention to the background or to what is backgrounded by orientation versus what is foregrounded or in front of us, I turn to what is underground, or under the surface of objects and bodies. The privileging of the ocular and the visual picture occludes what we cannot see. In order to account for what is underground, other senses are engaged. In drawing from Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed, I want to consider vibrational perception — and our account for the pleasure and pain in our bodily contacts.



Figure 1: Freshly tattooed oranges in a box.

The Objects

The recent turn to (or toward) objects is not only a trend in critical theory, it is perhaps an expanded analysis of networks of relationships that already exist, and networks of broken relationships. As Bill Brown in his essay on "Thing Theory" (2001) argues,

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, how-ever momentarily (4).

Brown draws from Martin Heidegger's object and thing theory put forth in Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (1971). Brown advances Heidegger's exploration of "what in a thing is thingly?" (Heidegger 165), and Vladimir Nabakov's literary approach to the dialectic of "looking through" versus "looking at" in *Transparent Things* (Nabakov 1). By overlaying Heidegger onto Nabakov, Brown discerns how language reveals our relationship to an object and our conception of its objectness or its thingness (Brown 5). Following Heidegger, Brown suggests that "things" are all around us in our everyday life, but it isn't until the thing breaks or becomes a hindrance that we have an acute awareness of its materiality and even meaning. When things are no longer useful or usable their past and non-futurity are foregrounded as the present pierces our momentary reality.

In 2001, Brown edited a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled "Things." In this issue art historians, scientists, cultural theorists, and critical theorists came together to put forth what has now been termed new materialism. Since that time, numerous debates about this turn toward object theory have surfaced. At the 2014 American Society for Theatre

Research Conference (themed “What Performs?”), Rebecca Schneider’s plenary address cauterized this turn toward objects in her presentation titled “Lithic Liveness and Agential Theatricality.” Schneider’s concern with new materialism as she presents it is its “a-historicality, potential essentialism...universalizing and if not anthropomorphizing ... generalized animacy” (Scheider 3). What Schneider fails to address are the productive “returns” of new materialism in particular its application in ecology and other realms of posthuman theory. Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects* reminds us that object oriented ontology and thing theory allow us to trespass the narrowing affects of continental philosophy and its cumulated anthropocentrism (Morton 22-23).

I enter this discussion or investigation of things or objects and specifically vibratory objects through what Dwight Conquergood designates as a “commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing” (2001, 7). My interest in vibration is a result of my phenomenological experiences of tattooing myself as performance art. As such, this essay incorporates performative writing and memory as an equal partner in the analysis and uncovering of vibration and its effect and affect on things. “Vibration,” as Shelley Trower defines it in *Senses of Vibration: A History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound*, “is not itself a material object at all, but it is bound up with materiality: vibration moves material, and moves through material” (6). In the most fundamental sense, vibration, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is wave activity or oscillation. We experience vibration in our daily lives through sound energy, light energy, and even our bodies have various vibratory or oscillating systems (Enns and Trower 2-3).

In 2001, I was sitting in my studio with a box of three hundred oranges, my tattoo guns, tattoo power unit, foot pedal, needles, ink, paper towels, rubbing alcohol, green soap, and a list of words—three hundred words, translated into a fake Latin, arranged in alphabetical order. I began to tattoo in a calligraphic or Old English style—a font type or style that would or could “read” as classical tattoo design or “flash” (Schiffmacher and Riemschneider). This list of words was fabricated through an ethnographic art project I was doing in graduate school. I wanted to conduct a survey within the LGBT community of the types of words that members of this community had heard used against them, the derogatory and crude names. I printed index cards with a question: “What names have you been called?” I visited LGBT bars in the San Francisco Bay area (San Jose and San Francisco) and distributed these “surveys” to the bars’ patrons. I collected over one hundred cards with multiple words listed on the cards. As I sorted through the words, I became interested in how certain words and phrases had “coded” meanings. This led me to creating a “visual” system of coding or obscuring the overt meaning of the words through a translation into a faux Latin. Among the Aestheticizing Risk in Wartime first words tattooed were *alimonia* and then *aula*: diesel and queenie respectively. I sat in that chair for three days tattooing word after word, activating the constant reciprocation of the needle bar, the tiny needles, piercing over and over into the skins of the oranges, the vibration of the needles changing frequency and velocity as I pressed harder and lighter on the pedal. These oranges were transforming before my eyes, nose and fingers from delectable edibles to leaking bodies.

Slowly and methodically I marked each succulent citrus with a textual identity, an identity in a language of ancient, Western, privileged significance—Latin or a sort of faux Latin. *Gallo Vulgo Esurio Meretrix* or Dick Hungry Whore (www.sheilamalone.com/DHW) is an art project where I queered little oranges with slang terms. Collecting over three hundred derogatory words aimed at LGBTQ people, I translated each word into a Latin equivalent. While I never studied Latin, one of the intentions of the art project was to relate a low culture—spoken word or vernacular, a spoken vulgarity, to a high cultured written word, creating a taxonomy of queerness and

“dirtiness.” What better way to mark, or to im/mortalize the words but to tattoo them onto these little organic orange bodies? The tattoo is “an indelible mark” (Sanders and Vail 60-1). Through the process of marking the oranges with “indelible symbols” I was challenging the dialectical relationship between permanence and ephemerality. Initially conceived as a visual and spatial installation, the project became performative, about the tattooing process, the process of translation, the process of classifying, and the spectacular, sensorial process of rotting that these oranges performed.



Figure 2: Examples of freshly tattooed oranges;
“Sperma Regina, Bacula, Volutus Cupidus Meretrix”

Coming to the orange is no accident. The orange and other citrus fruits have been used as a practice substrate for tattoo artists for decades (Alayon). In more recent years, fake or “practice” skin is used, when “real” bodies are unavailable or when citrus fruit does not suffice. The material history of the orange in relationship to tattooing is further complicated by the orange’s particular signification in US LGBTQ politics. The orange, while it signifies health, vitamins, sunshine, antidote to scurvy, also holds a deeply rooted past in economic, cultural and political conflict, not exclusive to the US as the orange literally figures in global economies of bodies and information.¹

The Orange Isn’t Just An Orange



Figure 3: Installation view, day 2

The orange is an ancient fruit and well traveled. Its history can be traced through Spanish Colonialism dating back to the 1500s and eventually to genetic mutation experiments of the 19th century and early 20th century in Brazil and the US (Reuther and Webber). The orange as a commodity implicates laboring bodies, fluctuating markets, and global ecologies (Reuther 161). In *Citrus: A History*, Pierre Laszlo points out that the history of the citrus is both mythical, complex, and complicit in the slave trade and the colonization of the “New World.” He writes, “The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors brought plants to be turned into remunerative crops [to California and Florida] (sugarcane, cocoa,

citrus trees, and later on, others, such as cotton and coffee). They also transported slave labor for these plantations" (Laszlo 27). Laszlo also notes that Florida and California have dominated the citrus industry in the United States in terms of cultivation and production since the late 19th century. One of the reasons has to do with the organizing efforts of the citrus farmers and the cooperatives they formed in the 19th century as a way to go up against the railroad companies' high prices charged for transportation of their crops to urban centers (Laszlo 51). Another form of organizing, centering around the citrus industry, occurred in the 1970s in the U.S. Orange growers from Florida ran numerous advertisements on television purporting to grow the best tasting oranges in the world: "The Florida Grown Orange."

Also in the 1970s, Anita Bryant launched a media attack against gay and lesbian people, specifically calling for the recall of a Florida law that protected homosexuals from discrimination. She was the spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, the face of the orange. Anita Bryant's vitriolic speech included saying things like, "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nailbiters" (Jones 37). Gays and Lesbians organized and boycotted orange juice in 1977 (Self 242). Slogans appeared on buttons like "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges" and "Tell Anita You're Against Discrimination: Vote June 7th." Anita Bryant may have had a nice dose of vitamin C as the face of the orange, but in spewing anti-gay speech she galvanized the resistance of queer bodies (Shilts 299). Thus, the orange absorbed symbolic and cultural meaning attached to LGBT politics of the 1970s. Presented as a particularly important moment in the adhesion of gay rights, in 2002 the San Francisco Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society mounted an exhibition titled "Oranges and Butterflies," referring specifically to the events surrounding the Anita Bryant controversy (Morse). This exhibition featured objects and ephemera such as the previously mentioned political buttons that helped to coalesce the LGBT movement of 1977, and photographs featuring marches against Anita Bryant. The energy of the movement helped to organize networks of LGBT protestors around the United States.



Figure 4: Installation view with visitor, tattooed oranges, day 2.

Vibration

Vibration occurs as a result of disturbance to energy systems. Vibration is wave motion that results from disturbance. Sound, light, and other energies in the physical world travel as waves. Vibrations are understood through sensing bodies when they resonate, when they are heard, seen, felt. We feel vibrations all around us in our daily lives, in the quotidian materiality of the world. As Shelley Trower argues, "[vibration] is not a commodity, or object, or substance" (Trower 6). We think about vibration as related to energy: electro-magnetic, seismic, light, and sound. When energy moves through a substance it travels in waves. Some substances or materials disturb the wave motion; they can absorb, or reflect the energy in varying amounts depending on the substance's

material make up. An obvious example is sound. Its waves change speed when the sound encounters objects or substances with different densities like water, air, rock, or bodies. Potential energy can be described as the energy that occurs as a result of an object's position in a system. A spring is a simple example, or gravitational pull on an object resting on a down hill slope. Potential energy cannot be transferred from one object to another without kinetic energy. Kinetic energy is the energy that is produced through motion and can be transferred from one object to another.

A tattoo artist uses and creates vibration through the application of electricity to the tattoo gun and the pressing of the needles into the skin. The tattoo gun itself uses kinetic and potential energy to move the needles up and down—the gun is a system that uses electricity or direct current (DC) which is applied to two electromagnetic coils. These coils, when electricity is introduced, pull the armature down, also pressing a spring. When the armature moves down it breaks the circuit from the contact screw and the electromagnetic field collapses. The spring releases its energy—moving back to its rest state, and the armature moves back up, reconnecting the circuit to the contact screw, and the entire cycle repeats over and over again at a high speed (Feltman). The vibration created in this system occurs from the moving parts and the transfer of energy. The tattooist uses his or her other hand to feel the vibration of the needles as they enter the skin. Through the different depths of the needles piercing into the skin, the tattooist can determine if the tattoo is successfully penetrating.

Thus, "Vibration" as applied to the notion of tattooing refers to something more than the simple movement of needles up and down. The tattoo gun has potential and kinetic energy. The tattooist uses vibration as a way of reading or sensing accuracy. The vibration is feedback information. This information has the capacity to interrupt material structures and change them. With tattooing, the change that occurs appears to be at the surface, the skin, skin deep, but this is really only relative to what the needle bar's adjustment is. To successfully tattoo, without scarring human skin, the needles need to penetrate the skin to the third layer of epidermis—no deeper (Alayon). Otherwise, scarring occurs and the tattoo can become raised from the skin. Lacking smoothness because of the nature of a scar, this type of tattoo loses clarity and sharpness.

In "Inscriptions of The Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America" Susan Benson claims that most tattooees are looking for a way to claim their selfness—a sort of me-ness, as a response to feeling dislocated, dispersed, or unstable. I argue that tattooing is a process of exchanging energy from one object to another including the body; the body can be human, animal, plant, or other and is literally objectified as its materiality is interrupted. Through this interruption by the tattoo needles, the recipient has a sense of her or his density, frailty, stamina, solidness, liquidness, etc. This sense of objectness or as Benson calls it "me-ness" is a separation of mind and body happens through the exchange of vibration—from the needle to the skin.

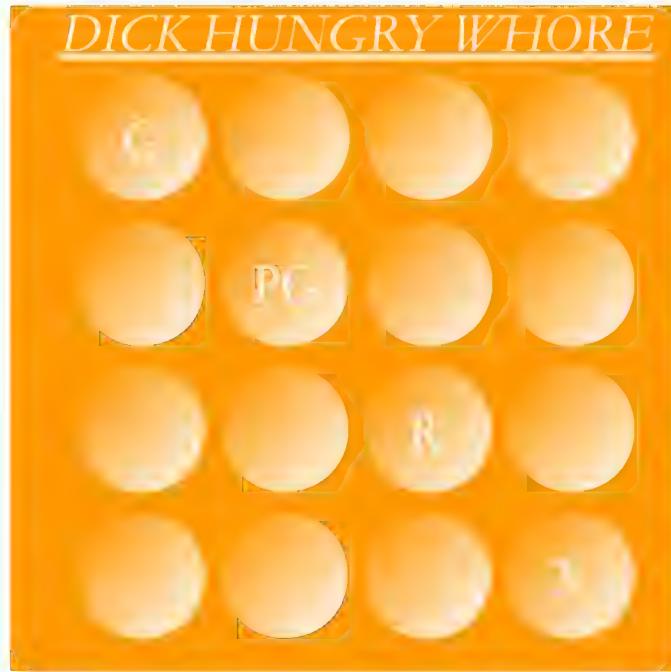


Figure 5: Screenshot from the interface for database: DHW.

www.sheilamalone.com/DHW

Phenomenology And The Order of The Chaotic

The things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolises or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favourable or unfavourable.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The World Of Perception* (63)

Through this phenomenological understanding, and specifically focusing on the sensations and perceptions of the bodies that are being pierced, tattooing can be seen as a kind of sub-particle shouting. In other words, the object being tattooed is transformed via the energy exchange, and this exchange is an oscillation. To sense, to feel, to see, to hear and to experience the tattoo is both a process of immanence and transcendence. As the tattooer, there is sensation of vibrations that flow from the vibrating tattoo gun and through the hand. The vibrations also travel from the tattoo gun to the orange and through to the hand. So the machine is an object that produces vibrations and is actually in between two objects, the object being tattooed (the orange), and the object (or hand) that is an extension of the body of the tattooer. The machine is the in-between of two objects, creating a loop of vibrations. Most graphs and illustrations of waves tend to depict the wave-form linearly, with infiniteness implied along particular dimensions. In this process (of tattooing) the graph might look more like a möbius strip, where the vibration falls back into itself. As power is slowed or removed, and the vibration ceases, the graph would turn into a collapsing concentric spiral, that radiates back out, and as soon as the power is turned back on, the looping wave is regenerated and flows. When the wave is at rest, we can call this potential energy, when the particles or matter are activated via motion, the wave is in kinetic mode (Shipman, Wilson, and Higgins 82).

Surrounded by randomness, we are constantly creating conceptual order out of matter on as many levels as we can access. Perhaps at every level of the material world randomness and vibration are forever entwined in a rebellious act. At the atomic level we can conceptualize all of matter as rebelling against the order that humans inevitably impose on it: the real world. When things are random and when they are purposefully out of

order, what does that do to how we interact with objects? Are we always trying to reorder into classifications, categories, taxonomies of life?

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* gives not only an historical account of the social and cultural changes in punishment, but also an understanding of how classification and hierarchical organization produces power relationships through the ranking of objects, bodies, and even space. Foucault writes, "all these serializations formed a permanent grid: confusion was eliminated" (Foucault 145-6). The tattooing process, the moments when the needles pierce the object, are momentary breaks from an ordered existence, from the order of the skin and the order that will inevitably creep back into the picture. As the tattoo image is completed a visual order is restored. Order and chaos live side-by-side, coterminous in the objects and underneath the surface of our sentient life.

Ordering The Oranges: Making Random Meaning

After tattooing three hundred oranges I separated the oranges into four categories based loosely on my interpretation of how the US film industry (Motion Picture Association of America) rates the content of films. I decided to organize the oranges according to four categories of ratings (G, PG, R, and X), all the while asking myself, “Is language so easily rated and ordered?” I attempted to make sense out of the words, phrases, ideas, thinking of how a term was thrown or hurled at someone. Some terms have been so ingrained in LGBT subculture that they might bring a smile to your face, like “Friends of Dorothy,” which was given a G-rating, of course. Within each category the oranges were alphabetized. Finding a discrete packet of queerness embodied in a single orange, exhibit visitors could navigate the translations through a computer interface. Using html (hyper text mark up language) and javascript, the interface allowed the English or vernacular speech to sound (out loud) over speakers. The resulting sonic environment became a playful poetic space where a visitor would quickly scroll through words on the computer screen, enacting a performative queering through a cacophony of dirty words. Viewers disrupted normative time and narrative by enacting this dirty poetry, scrolling quickly through the linked text. The oranges invoked an iteration and a hailing of queerness. The oranges didn’t care about being hailed. They still rotted.



Figure 6: Screenshot from the interface for database: DHW, www.sheilamalone.com/DHW

From the moment the oranges were conceived, their future was written as an organic death. By tattooing each orange, the organic process was expedited, and iconographically marked on each one. The process of breaking the skin of the orange unseals the natural envelope of the fruit, opening the fruit up to a more rapid decay. This rupture of the skin allows microorganisms—the work horses of decay—more opportunity to start this rotting process. In *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues against a reproductive futurity. Edelman writes:

If the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity, if the jouissance, the corrosive enjoyment, intrinsic to queer (non) identity annihilates the fetishistic jouissance that works to consolidate identity by allowing reality to coagulate around its ritual reproduction, then the only oppositional status to which our queerness could ever lead would depend on our taking seriously the place of the death drive. (30)

In other words, to embrace queerness or non-heteronormativity is to not reproduce and to mortify the body—literally. Tattooing, in a sense, then is a process of queering and mortifying the body, the bodies of these oranges.



Figure 7: Installed, tattooed orange Day 9.

Sex, Gender, Rot, Death

Piercing the skin of the orange releases the zest and the oil from the skin; sometimes even a little juice flows out. The smell is intoxicating. As I tattooed over and over again, I noticed that some of the greener oranges smelled different than the riper oranges. The ripe oranges squirted more, and they were easier to tattoo because of being softer. The greener oranges held the lines better as the skin was harder and more dense. Longer words and compound phrases translated into more piercings, more releases, and a faster rotting process. Some of the words tattooed on the oranges were specifically gendered and created certain identifications. One such example was the X-rated phrase *anus subtermoveo* which I translated from “pooper poker.” Another phrase which demonstrated a certain gendering and identification was *cista linxi* translated from “lick box.” As the words wrapped and tugged at the curvatures of the oranges, gendered identities and queernesses slipped into lost meanings. The nonsense Latin eclipsed and masked the marginalizing potential that the spoken word performed. Were the oranges finally free from signification? Sitting on the shelves awaiting their next transformation, the smell of citrus and mold merged into an overwhelming and inevitable queer futurity of death. As the oranges began to rot over the span of two weeks, the smell was replaced with an oddly medicinal aura, slightly reminiscent of penicillin. Each orange rotted in its own completely unique way and at its own rate. This rate of decay varied from what seemed like certain quantifiable factors and other unknown or perhaps random factors. The observed or knowable factors included how much of the tattoo covered the surface of the orange, how large the orange was, and whether or not the orange was green (less ripe) or bright orange (more ripe). Once the oranges started rotting, the change seemed to overtake certain rows of bodies more than other rows. Proximity of the oranges to other oranges sometimes affected the rate of rot, but so did placement within the room of the installation. Some oranges started molding and turning green from the outside. The green powdery mold blanketed the orange like a soft cozy, slowly wrapping itself around the orange’s supple curves. The mold was developing an intimate relationship with the body

of the orange. Death and sex seemed intricately connected; the mold was making love to the surface of the orange. Some of the oranges rotted from the inside out. The interiors disappeared, leaving the orange an empty dried skin. The tattoos in these cases remained intact. This loss was almost undetectable, unlike the oranges that slowly became encased in green mold; the oranges that lost their insides were like preserved mummies. They appeared to be the body without soul and without the messiness of life. Each orange experienced vibration as a unique phenomenon in terms of the initial tattoo and the queering of temporality. Vibration of the needles and the vibration of the crafting the tattoo (as this is a combination of the force of the machine and the hand of the tattooist) contribute to how the oranges experience death, decay, mummification, throwing off their thingliness.

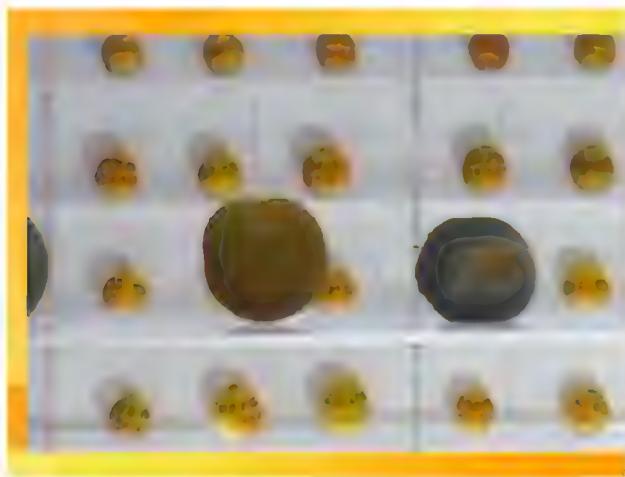


Figure 8: Installation view, tattooed oranges Day 9.

The Orange Is An Orange Is An Orange

The orange is the fruit of the citrus. The orange tree is a self-pollinating tree, which means that it has both male and female flowers. The fruit of the orange tree is what contains its seeds. And these seeds are what is needed for regeneration. Today, many orange trees are grown whose fruit do not contain seeds. Perhaps these oranges embody the ultimate no-future, no seed, no possibility of reproduction. As Jane Bennet argues in *Vibrant Matter* “there is [a] public value in following the scent of a nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts” (Bennet xiii). The orange and the tattoo gun are objects that potentially (energetically and figuratively) restructure our understanding of queerness, death and pleasure. The orange is a queer body where vibrations, vibrations of the tattoo, liberate the object from its normative signification and ultimately from its own historic materiality. The taxonomies of these queer bodies force them into a state of readability: one understands order, one can control its meaning. But the activity underground, the vibration and the microorganism that we do not see, produces the future we can only desire.

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Notes

Notes

1. Genetic property, migrant labor, economy of bee pollination, just to name a few ways these “things” impact our daily lives – See *Citrus: A History* (2007) by Pierre Laszlo for an exhaustive tracing of the citrus through an historical, economic and cultural lens. 

Bio



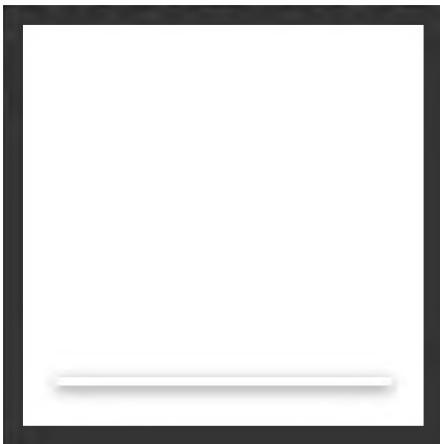
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Sheila Malone researches the intersections of gender, technology, performance and motorcycles. Dr. Malone oversees the Technical Theatre Program at Chaffey College where she is an Associate Professor of Theatre Arts. She received a PhD in Performance Studies and Theatre History from UCLA, and an MFA in Digital Media Arts from CADRE Laboratory for New Media at San Jose State University. She is the managing editor of *The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies*. She has worked for numerous non-profit arts organizations, for-profit and educational theatre companies throughout the United States. Her films *San Francisco Dykes on Bikes* and *Annie Sprinkle's Amazing World of Orgasm* have screened all over the world. Her writing has appeared in *The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies*, *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, *Rhizome*, *Artshift*, and *Switch*.



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QUIZ! Which you are you right NOW!?



- I am human
- I am raced
- I am gendered
- I am abled
- I am othered
- I am
- I am me

Activity: Reinvent Yourself!

Materials Needed:

Paper bag, a piece of paper, something to write with, scissors (optional)

Directions:

1. make a list of what makes you "you" in order of importance (don't number anything)
2. cut or tear the list into individual items
3. place items in a small paper bag
4. Blow up the paper bag with air
5. squeeze the top
6. pop it

The pieces of you fall out, reorganizing your being.

A THEORETICAL DIVERSION

Words become the texture through which we remember great thinkers as their faces become lost and distorted through time. We erase as we canonize, dissect, pull apart, excerpt, analyze. We make bits of a corpus primary texts as we create meaning and context for the thoughts from the past. Through this process of creating and erasure we silo, separate, and sometimes miss when two people are making the same noise, especially when they are speaking across languages and cultures. We translate, reformat, and re-publish, and paraphrase the words of others as we mix them with our own and through this practice our thought grows. We tend to erase ourselves along with the author. We reframe their words with our own, not allowing the image of their faces to obscure our understanding of primary texts. The face and embodiment of the thinker can be just as important as the words said though. Lived experience colors our understanding of the world. Our texts are an extension of that

experience. The textural layer is superimposed on a person, often times obscuring that at the center of the words was someone trying to make sense of their world so they could become.

The thing that always struck me about Zora Neale Hurston and Frantz Fanon is how their life experience is central to their thought and practice as performative practice (for Hurston) and as clinical and cultural psychiatric therapy (for Fanon). The reflexive practice of remembering is central to their understanding of the world, of the world's potential. It is this reflective practices that places their work in a performative space even as it does the hard work of moving forward theories of the human, society, and psychic colonization and decolonization.

Both Hurston and Fanon are positioned as people who spoke of black subjectivity. They do, that is the reflexive practice of their experience. However, they also focus on society and being human in general, in a historical world where race and ethnicity have become central nodal points that literally change how a body is able to move through the world. The limits are more obvious for the black body, but all bodies are limited. Being able to pinpoint the limits, while disorienting and painful as is illustrated by the primary texts, is also the thing that allows the black body to be closer to a transcendental or cosmic consciousness. The ability to transcend race, those moments where the human is able to just be and to achieve mutual recognition as human, as being in the same bag, or part of the cosmic yes, is the gift and the pain of the racialized body.

Frantz Fanon starts *Black Skin, White Masks* with "The explosion will not happen today. It is too early... or too late" (5). The experience of being human for Fanon is being trapped in a cultural box, constantly in a state of missing the instances where man can leave "the zone of non-being," the place where man is "stripped bare of every essential from which genuine departure can "emerge," if he is willing to descend into a "veritable hell" (xii), the space of soul murder. By the time we reach chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man", the explosion cannot be missed. He sees the completion of this process as a violent, explosive death followed by a reconfigured new being, a new "me". Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" describes a similar process of becoming a social being once the black human is encountered and scripted by the Other. Though she does not go into the details of this experience the framework is nearly identical to Fanon's.

"I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, a Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl."

Though the new Zora does not become from an explosion, the omission of details, and the context of the experience, in a state high-speed social travel, is the same as Fanon, who experienced his explosive transformation on a train. Despite Hurston's attempt to not speak of the violence, by the end of the essay the central role of being emptied, evacuated, is clear. She speaks of herself as a bag amongst other bags, full of things both meaningful and worthless. By the end of the essay, we have a better sense of what this means.

"In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly".

For both Fanon and Hurston, there is no such thing as a new cultural space. We do not get to exist beyond the limits of the human world in life. There is only destruction or emptying and refilling, the space of culture and of self, with a torn or wrinkled bag. As we work towards a radical reflexivity in our own work, we have to ask not just what we are breathing in, but what we are breathing out as we attempt to move our bags with enough force to make them explode so we can make something new.